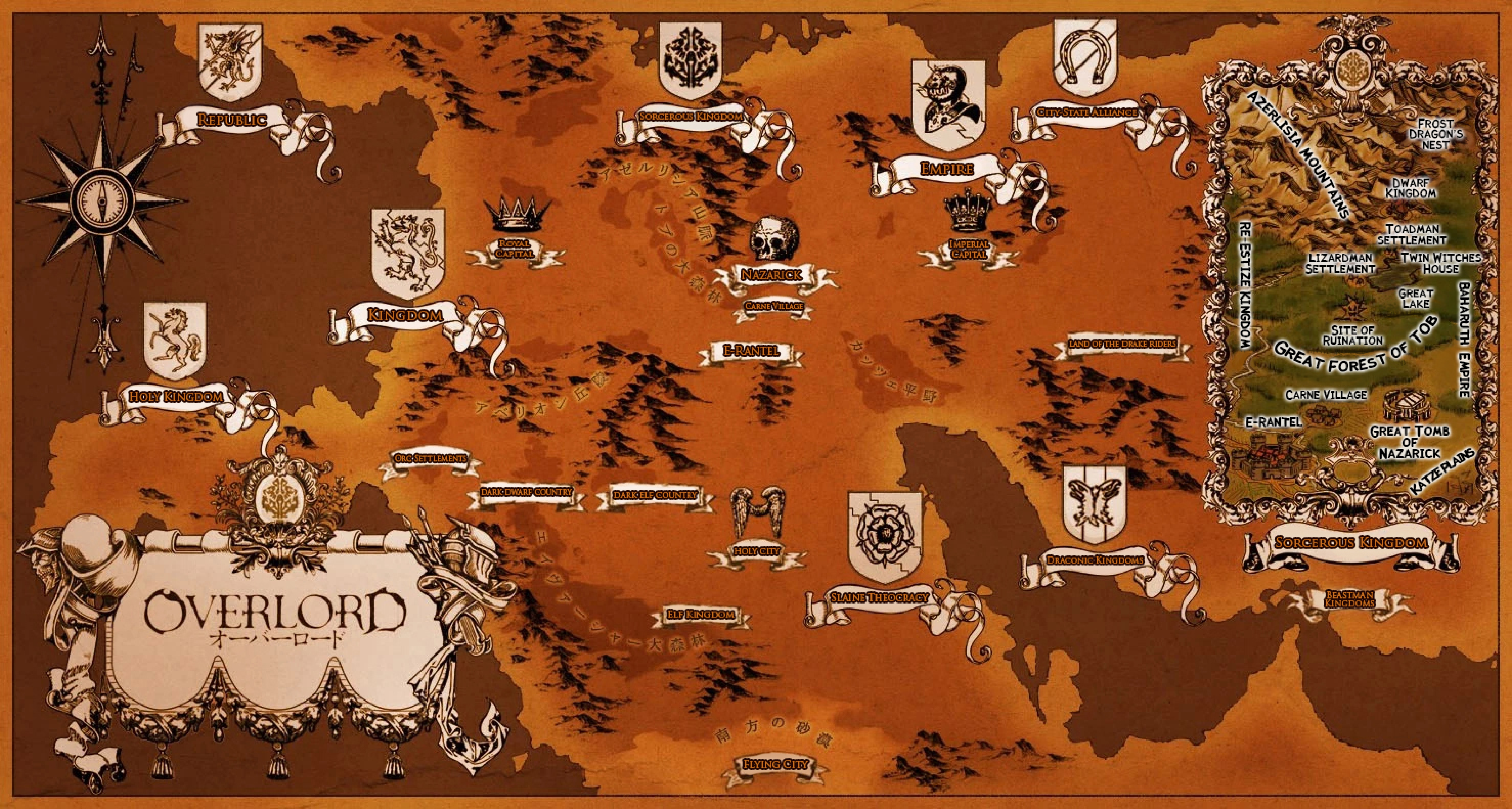
OVERLORD ［10］ The ruler of Conspiracy *Kugane Maruyama*

illustration by so-bin

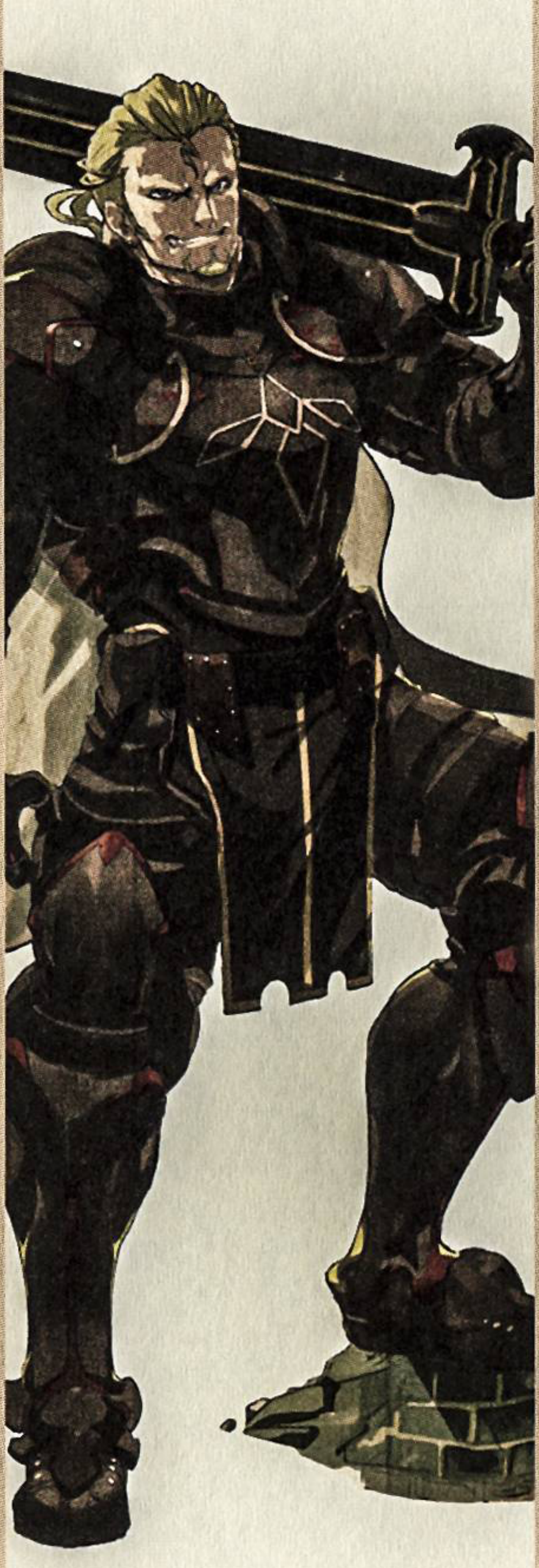
オーバーロード

10 謀略の統治者

丸山くがね


Republic
Sorcerous Kingdom
City-State Alliance
Empire
Royal Capital
Imperial Capital
アゼルリシア山脈
トブの大森林
Nazarick
Carne Village
Kingdom
E-Rantel
Holy Kingdom
アベリオン丘陵
カッツェ平野
Land of the Drake Riders
Orc Settlements
Dark Dwarf Country
Dark Elf Country
Holy City
Slaine Theocracy
Draconic Kingdoms
Beastman Kingdoms
エイヴァーシャー大森林
Elf Kingdom
南方の砂漠
Flying City
OVERLORD
オーバーロード
Azerlisia Mountains
Frost Dragon's Nest
Dwarf Kingdom
Re-Estize Kingdom
Toadman Settlement
Lizardman Settlement
Twin Witches House
Great Lake
Baharuth Empire
Site of Ruination
Great Forest of Tob
Carne Village
E-Rantel
Great Tomb of Nazarick
Katze Plains
Sorcerous Kingdom

Character 42



バジウッド・ペシュメル

人間種

baziwood peshmel

雷光 Lightning Bolt

Job —— One of the Four Imperial Knights

Residence —— First-Class District in the Imperial Capital

Job Classes

Fighter	? lv
Imperial Knight	? lv
Guardian	? lv

Birthday —— Rising Water Month, 19th Day

Interests —— Nothing special (he says)
Doing what his wives tell him.

{ personal character }

A commoner born in a back alley. He was quite strong, but he knew that he would die on the streets if he carried on like that. Thus he aimed for a specialized warrior class, that of a knight. He eventually distinguished himself and caught Jircniv's eye. While he was not very loyal at first, but after spending time near the Emperor, he developed a heartfelt respect for Jircniv, and he is probably the most loyal man in the Empire. His wives and lovers came from brothels, and he lives under the same roof as the five of them. The women get along very well.

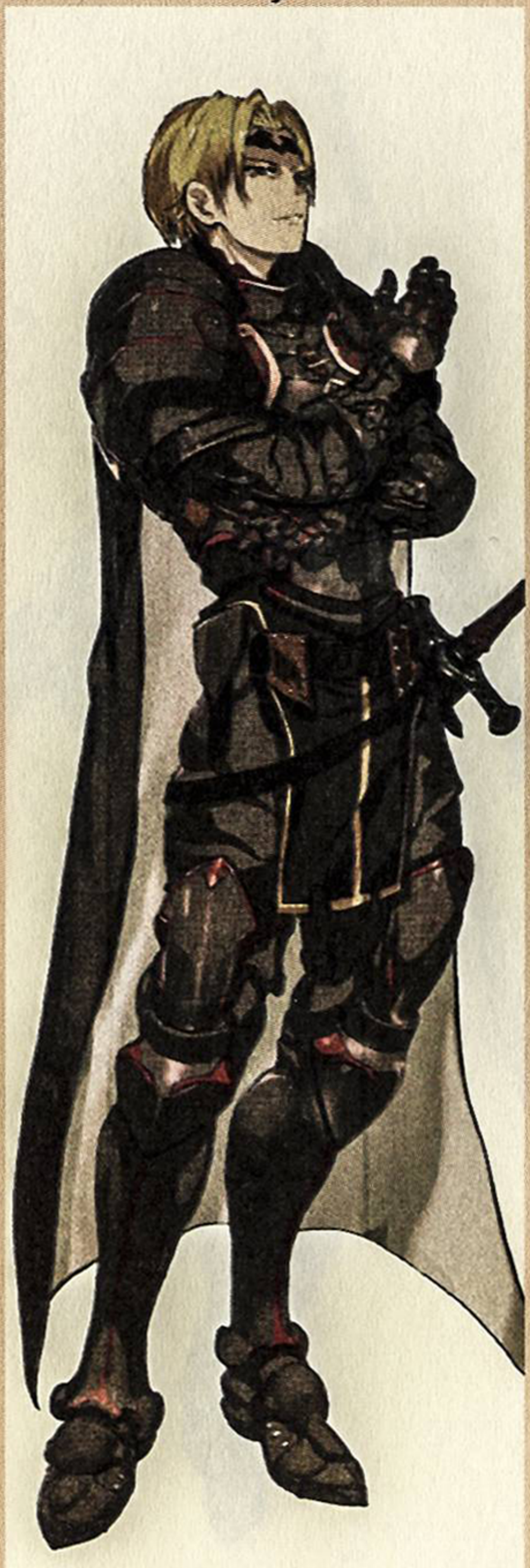
Character 43

ニンブル・アーク・デイル・アノック

人間種

nimble arc dale anoch

激風 Violent Gale



Job —— One of the Four Imperial Knights

Residence —— First-Class District in the Imperial Capital

Job Classes — Noble Fighter —— ? lv
Rider —— ? lv
Bishop —— ? lv

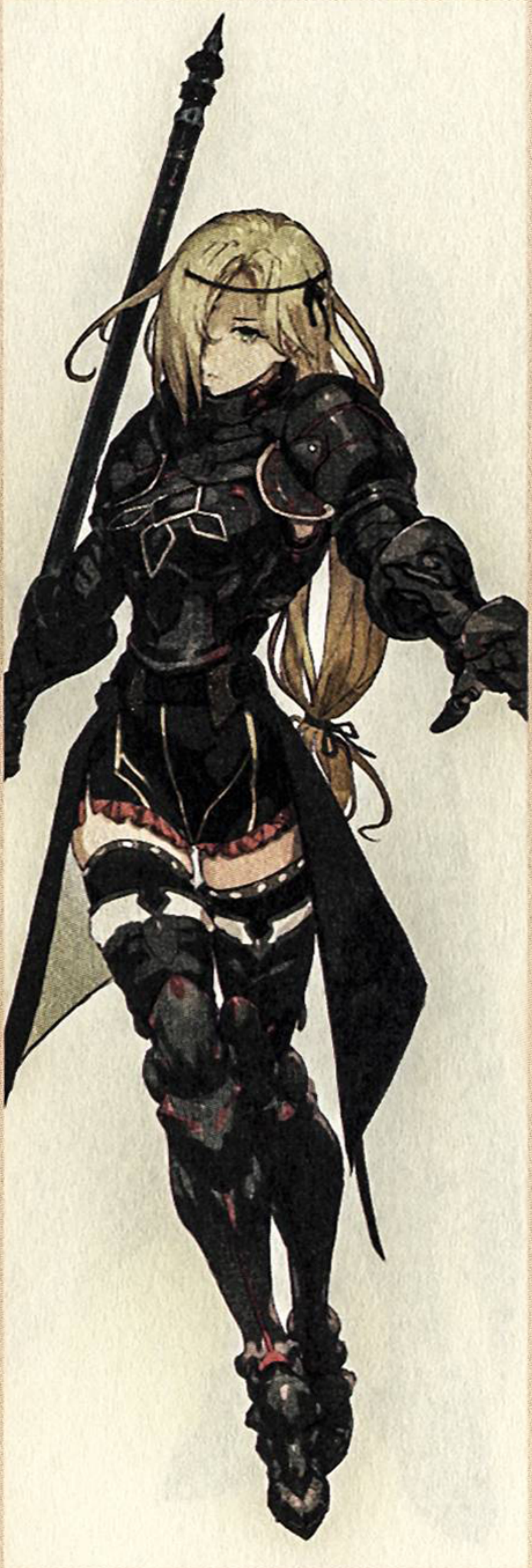
Birthday —— Middle Fire Month, 8th Day

Interests —— Conducting Tea Ceremonies
Finding Delicious Tea

{ personal character }

The second son of a baron, with an elder brother, an elder sister, and a younger sister. He got along well with his family members Nimble caught Jircniv's eye due to the actions taken by his brother in order to improve his position/standing (of course, even without that, Jircniv would not let an excellent specimen like Nimble escape him). Currently, Nimble has earned the title of "Earl" through his personal achievements. What worries him now is finding a potential marriage partner for his little sister. Both his older and younger sisters are nagging him to get married too.

Character 44



レイナース・ロックブルズ

人間種

leinas rockbruise

重爆 Heavy Explosion

Job — One of the Four Imperial Knights

Residence — First-Class District in the Imperial Capital

Job Classes
Noble Fighter — ? lv
Priest — ? lv
Cursed Knight — ? lv

Birthday — Unknown (She’s not telling)

Interests — Undoing her curse
Fantasizing about what to do after breaking her curse
Writing in her revenge diary

{ personal character }

Formerly the daughter of a noble family, she earned glory for taking up the sword to slay monsters within her family's domain. However, while hunting a monster, she was struck by its death curse, which transformed the right side of her face into a disgusting state which continually secreted pus. The curse was unbreakable. Fearing a scandal, her family disowned her and her fiance dumped her. In the end, she made breaking the curse her life's goal, and her personality changed so that she would do anything towards that end. Jircniv helped her get revenge on her family and fiance by dealing with them.

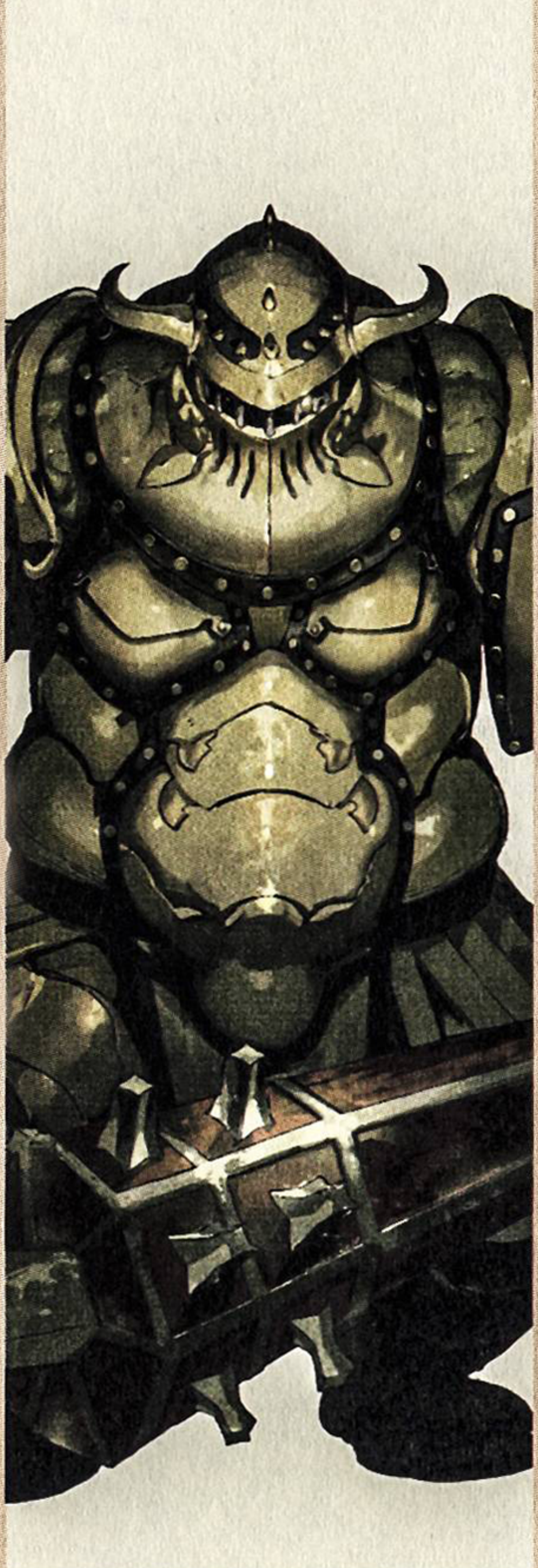
ゴ・ギン

亜人種

go gin

八代目武王

8th Generation Martial Lord



Job — Martial Lord

Residence — First-Class District in the Imperial Capital

Race Classes – Troll — ? lv
War Troll — ? lv

Job Classes — Champion — ? lv

Birthday — Sword Star, Second Star (The Troll Calender doesn't translate into the human calendar.

Interests — Combat Training

personal character

This is a list of the Martial Lords and their nicknames. The First and Second Generation Martial Lords are dead. The rest have not yet died in the arena.

1st Generation Martial Lord: none. Also known as the Martial Lord.
2nd Generation Martial Lord: none. Also known as the 2nd Martial Lord.
3rd Generation Martial Lord: Sword Demon (Kenma).
4th Generation Martial Lord: Weak King (Jakuou). Also known as Mudsword (Doroken) and Strongest (Saikyou).
5th Generation Martial Lord: Four Thunder Whip (Shiraiben)
6th Generation Martial Lord: White Emei (Hakuagaba)
7th Generation Martial Lord: Rot Wolf (Kusariookami).
8th Generation Martial Lord: Current Martial Lord. May be known in future as the Giant King (Kyouou)?

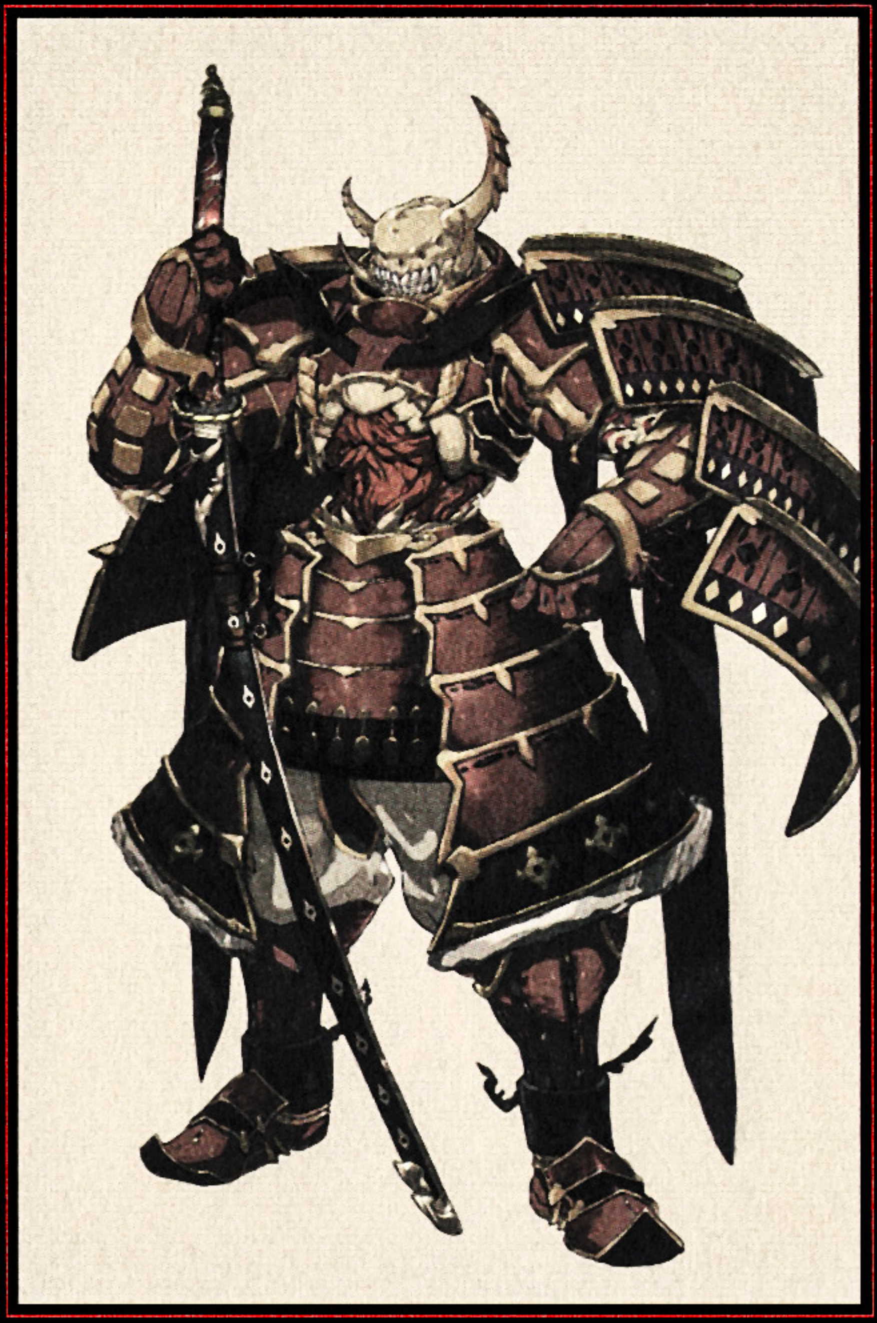
5/41

Warrior Takemikazuchi

異形種

bujintakemikazuchi

THE SAMURAI!



personal character

One of the Original Nine who founded Nine's Own Goal, he was drawn in by Touch Me's strength. His friends thought that making weapons was a hobby of his, but the truth was, he wanted to forge a weapon which could defeat Touch Me. Sadly, before it could be completed, a tragic event occurred - that insurpassable wall before him vanished. That ultimate sword (incomplete), bereft of a target, now decorates his position within the Treasury.

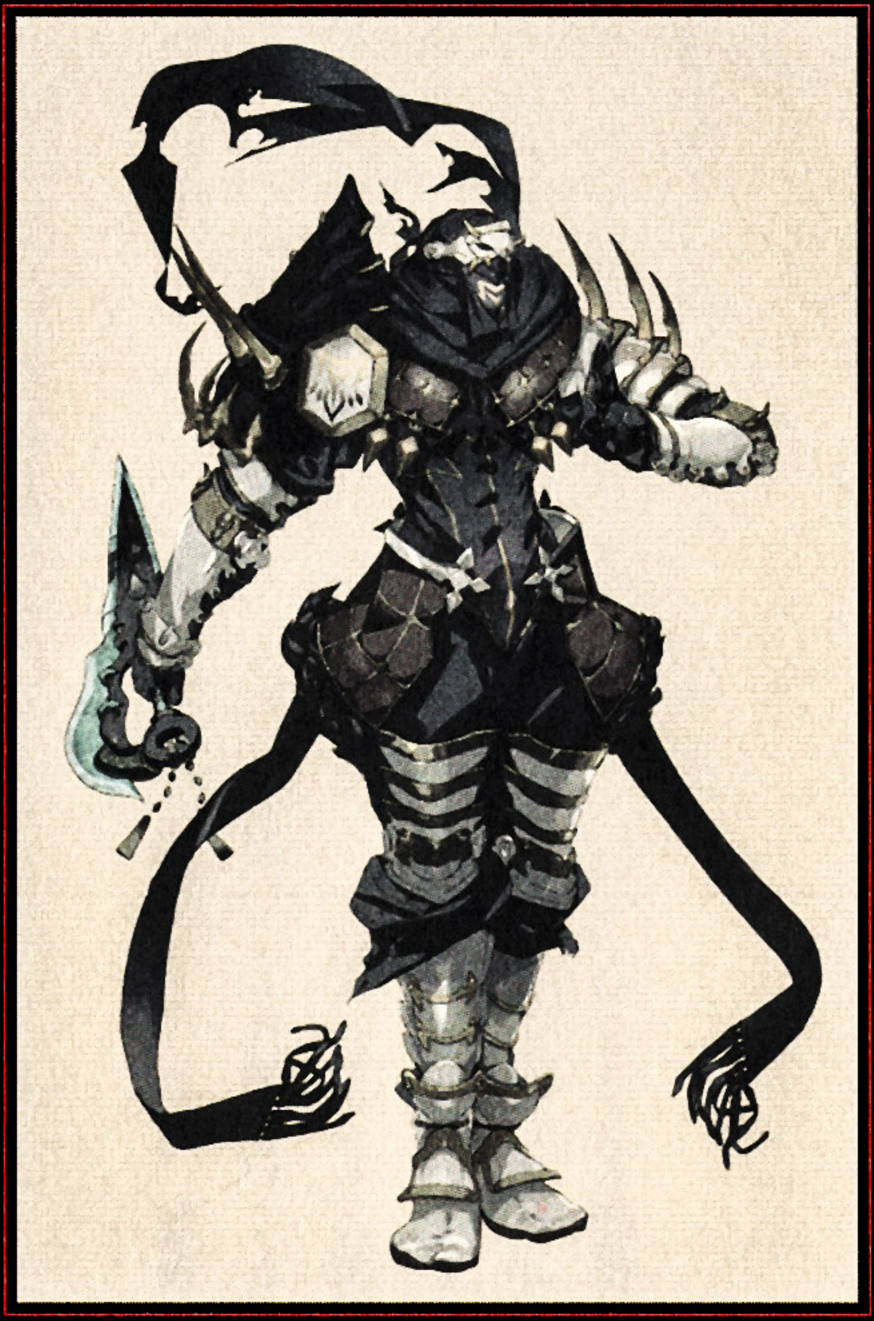
6/41

Nishiki Enrai

異形種

nishikienrai

THE NINJA!



personal character

A man swathed in a full-body ninja costume, whose face was cloaked in a veil of mystery. Very few people in Ainz Ooal Gown knew his true form. Incidentally, he was a heteromorphic being known as a Half-Golem. He did not work very hard on designing his body, and so it was smooth and textureless. He had a nickname for Warrior Takemikazuchi and the two of them got along well. Because of that, Cocytus and Narberal are also quite close, and when they are alone together, they end up getting along quite well, to the point where they seem completely unlike their public image.

OVERLORD

THE RULER OF CONSPIRACY

OVERLORD VOLUME 10

PROLOGUE

Albedo entered the room, and then filled her lungs with air.

Sadly, there was nothing in the air to stimulate her nose, but that was to be expected. After all, not only did her beloved master not possess a metabolism, he did not even breathe, so there was no scent he could have left behind.

Still -- she could feel it in her heart.

After breathing in the air where her master had been, she felt peace flowing through her soul.

This was what it meant to be a girl in love.

"Ku~ fufu."

As the soft chuckle escaped her lips, Albedo pressed her hand over her mouth.

It was not that anyone was there, or that her teeth were showing. However, it was not something a proper lady should have done.

Albedo sat primly upon the bed, and then laid down.

She sniffed again, and as expected, there was nothing in the air. Still, the fact that she could do this while lying on her beloved master's bed filled her with the deepest joy.

This was a perfectly reasonable course of action for a girl in love to take. If there was a woman who could lie on the bed of the man she loved, do the same things Albedo was doing and yet not feel anything while daring to call herself a "girl in love", then she would certainly consider that woman to be one that did not understand true love, and swiftly eliminate such an unpleasant person without delay.

“Haaa~”

Albedo pulled back the hands wandering down her belly. Now was not the time for such things.

It seems this is becoming a habit, Albedo thought as she pulled herself upright.

In any case, she had to finish the day’s tasks.

After founding the Sorcerous Kingdom and placing E-Rantel under their rule, Albedo’s workload had dramatically increased. Much of the reason for that was because the officials who were supposed to manage E-Rantel had fled to the Kingdom, leading to a shortage of administrative personnel.

The plan was to use the undead created by her master to handle this task. However, since they were still in the training phase, the result was that it consumed her time instead, and increased her workload. In addition, there were many other things that she had to do. While her schedule would probably free up in the near future, for the time being she would still be very busy.

Of course, to Albedo, these labors were not onerous. Or rather, there was not a single denizen of Nazarick who would say that service to their master was a hardship. This was what Albedo believed. One might even go so far as to say that the heavier her burden, the greater her joy.

“It’s about time to check on the results of their training…”

Said training had stretched from a few days to a few weeks. Even after a month, they were still only half-ready, but she would have to hand the reins of administration over to them and see how things turned out.

Recently, she had been considering a visit to the Kingdom, to meet with the King. In truth, her presence was not necessary, as long as her master -- who overflowed with wisdom -- was around. However, such tasks were little more than petty errands, which did not suit his role as an absolute ruler.

Kings had things which kings needed to do.

“Although, come to think of it… where does Ainz-sama plan to lead the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

A nation had policies which it could implement.

Once one had decided on them, they could to determine the laws of the land and the future direction of the entire country. For instance, they might decide to turn humans into slaves and have the entire country serve Nazarick. If they chose that path, then they would need to pass the appropriate laws to rule over humans as slaves. Then, with that as a forethought, they would need to consider various problems, such as how to deal with the nearby human countries, how to treat other countries’ humans, and other related problems.

However, her master had not been able to give her a clear answer, even until now.

In other words, the Sorcerous Kingdom was building itself on the foundations of the old house called the Kingdom, and it was missing its central leadership as it did so.

Could it be that this was the ideal sort of country for her beloved master? Or was he waiting for something? If it was the latter, she could only feel embarrassed that she could not read her master’s thoughts.

This was one of the few times that she was troubled by her master’s brilliant intellect.

There were many meanings to every move her master made, as a being of deep insight and distant considerations. She felt the most bitter regret because she could not immediately comprehend the significance of her master’s actions.

Even Demiurge -- whose intellect rivalled, or perhaps even surpassed hers -- had said in the past: “my wisdom could not even begin to catch up to the master’s; it is truly unbearable”. Still, even so--

“All I need to do is obey Ainz-sama’s decisions, no matter what kind of country he wants to create.”

In all ways but one, Albedo would faithfully follow her beloved husband.

“Still, what’s happened to him?”

But of course, there was no answer to the sound of Albedo’s muttering.

OVERLORD VOLUME 10

CHAPTER 1

THE SORCEROURS KINGDOM OF AINZ OOAL GOWN

Part 1

The Sorcerer King. The absolute ruler of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick and the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown. A being who ruled the 41 Supreme Beings, and the last of them who had remained in Nazarick. At this moment, that entity who should have been enjoying the attentions of his subordinates was curled up on a soft bed, reading a book.

Said bed had been moved from the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick to this place — to the private chambers of the former ruler of E-Rantel, Mayor Panasolei, which had been partially remodelled and converted into Ainz's own chambers. Ever since it had been moved here, he could no longer detect the fragrance which it used to emanate when it had still been located in Nazarick.

Perhaps it's because the bed here doesn't have perfume sprayed on it, Ainz thought as he leaned his weight onto the bed in question.

Of course, sleep was completely unnecessary for an undead being like Ainz.

Indeed, it was only the remnants of his humanity telling his mind that he should be tired. That was why Ainz occasionally did this sort of thing, lying down on a bed to cool down his overheated head and heart. However, that was only a temporary solution. Thus, lying down like this for a long time, like a human being would do, was actually quite meaningless.

Of course, there were always a few exceptions to the rule.

For instance — yes. While he was reading for instance. In particular, when he was mindful of the way others were looking at him.

It should be daytime soon… oh!

A weak ray of sunlight filtered in through the gap in the curtains, giving Ainz a rough idea of the time. With that, he stuffed the book he had been reading until now back under his pillow.

Then, he inclined his skull to look over to a corner of the room.

He saw a maid there.

She was one of Nazarick's regular maids, and she was attending to Ainz today — to be precise, she had attended to him since yesterday. Currently, she was elegantly seated on a chair with her back ramrod straight. However, that posture had not changed since last night. From what Ainz knew, none of the maids had failed to hold that position.

Her line of sight was constantly fixed on Ainz, barring several momentary distractions.

It was a truly indescribable burden.

Of course, she had certainly not intended to exert this pressure. It was simply because paying close attention to him would allow her to respond immediately to any situation that might arise. However, it made an everyman like Suzuki Satoru want to cry and beg "spare me, please".

Nobody would feel comfortable if they were constantly stared at like this, especially if it was a member of the opposite sex doing it. Even if nothing happened, it made him feel like he had left something undone somewhere.

The most important thing was the way she silently responded to Ainz if he made any movement at all.

Simply put — it was a miserable experience.

Of course, Ainz was an absolute ruler. If he forbade her to do so, she would stop. However, when he thought of the look on the maid's face if he said so, he could not bring himself to speak the words waiting in his mouth.

After coming to this world, Ainz had quickly sprung into action in the guise of Momon. That was the first time the maids had surrounded him like this. Even now, they continued to render their service to him with awe-inspiring loyalty. It was because he knew this that Ainz could not bring himself to make them obey him by force.

Besides, they will get tired of it after a while.

It had been a month since he had thought that.

The idea that this state of affairs might continue forever filled Ainz with some degree of unease. Because the maids took 41 days to complete a single shift rotation, he had decided to leave that matter for the future, but that line of thinking had merely kicked the can down the road until now.

Is this what they call the burden of leadership… administering Nazarick, planning for the group's future, responding to my subordinates' wishes… people who stand at the top really are great. No wonder they have such high salaries...

The people on top do so little and yet collect so much pay. Now that he understood what they were going through, Ainz laughed at his past foolishness. Then, he slowly rose from the bed.

At this moment, the maid silently rose from her seat as well. It made him feel as though there was a string connecting them.

How could her movements be so graceful after staying awake through the night?

"—I'm up."

"Yes. Then, your servant shall take her leave. After this, today's maid will come to take over for me."

Ainz did not say anything along the lines of "I'll leave it to you", but simply grunted "Umu" and waved his hand to indicate that she should carry on.

Perhaps I'm being too arrogant, Ainz thought.

Still, it might be better like this.

He had sent Hamsuke to ask around, and the maids' first response seemed to be, "It feels like he's dominating us, Ainz-sama is the best" or something like that. It would seem they were all masochists, and while it troubled Ainz when he first heard it, after calmly considering the matter, he realized that a ruler needed to act and dress the part. It was what his subjects would wish for.

Using a company as an example, a boss had to look and act like a boss.

When he thought about it in that way, Ainz felt that what he had done was what the Sorcerer King should have done. The fact was, when he had been spying on the ruler of the Empire, Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix, in his spare time, he noticed that the man conducted himself in pretty much the same manner.

Still, Suzuki Satoru had been a working man, and he felt a little uneasy about not saying something along the lines of, "Thanks for your hard work".

"...Then, you should go have a good rest yourself."

"Ah! — Please allow your servant to offer her deepest thanks for your generosity, Ainz-sama!"

The maid bowed deeply as she expressed her gratitude.

"However, it is thanks to this item that you so graciously lent me that your servant could stay by your side to attend you without having to rest, Ainz-sama."

No, that's not what I meant, Ainz muttered in his heart.

It was true that once one put on a Ring of Sustenance, one could go all day and night without any sleep. Still, sitting on a chair and watching Ainz all night should have been nothing short of hellish. Although he was very pleased by their dedication, there was no need for them to go that far.

At least they should cancel the night shift… the part where they watch me sleep, right?

As maids, it was only natural for them to faithfully serve their master with their hearts and souls.

He did not know exactly which of the maids had said it, but he remembered hearing it from one of them.

Faithfully serve their master, huh. What would you say if I wanted to live as an equal to you?

Unlike how he felt when he first came to this new world, Ainz was now confident that all his subordinates were absolutely loyal to him. As long as Ainz paid attention to his actions and did not do anything which would disappoint them, there was no chance of their betrayal — barring outside interference. In that case, perhaps he should change the relationship between them, and put himself on equal footing with the NPCs. That might be a good choice to make, at some point.

If that happened, Ainz would be free from this life of being a ruler, of having to rack his brains all day long. In addition —

—it would be like before, indeed, just like during the guild days. I wonder if I could go back to that sort of life again.

Whenever he spoke to the NPCs, he kept imagining his former friends superimposed over them. Because of that, Ainz hoped that he would not have to relate to them in the capacity of a master to a servant, but rather, the way they had in the past —

—*No*, Ainz thought as he mentally shook his head.

While he did not know what might plant the seeds of disappointment in his subjects, such a dramatic change in circumstances could not possibly be a wise decision. In addition, since he knew that they desired a master-servant relationship with him, it was his responsibility as their master to continue in that capacity. At the same time, as the last person who remained here, he had to do everything he could for the NPCs (the children).

The maid excused herself to Ainz, and left the room.

In that moment, Ainz sprang into action. First, he replaced the book under the pillow with another book. The book he substituted in had a very complex title — just looking at it would make anyone lose the will to continue reading. Then, the book he was reading last night went into his personal pocket dimension — his inventory.

After placing the book where it would not be easily stolen, Ainz breathed a sigh of relief.

That too, was part of his responsibilities as their master.

He certainly did not want to read those difficult books which made his head hurt all night. If possible, he wanted to read some popular books instead. However, being spotted reading such books would damage Ainz's dignity as a ruler. Therefore, Ainz was forced to take such troublesome measures.

Incidentally, he had already taken into consideration the fact that the maids would move the book under the pillow to another location.

Now that he had finished everything he could do on the bed, Ainz pushed aside the thin gauze canopy which shrouded the bed and rose to his feet.

Just then, several knocks came from the door. Shortly after that, the maid who was due to take over the next shift opened the door and entered the room.

As she saw Ainz getting off the bed, she smiled and approached him. It looked like she was the maid assigned to accompany Ainz today.

"Good morning, Fifth."

A blindingly radiant smile dawned on the maid's face.

"Good morning, Ainz-sama! I'll be in your care today!"

If Fifth had a tail, she would probably be wagging it with all her might. Suddenly, he thought of Pestonya wagging her tail in the past.

Her maid uniform was the same as the one worn by the previous maid, Fourth. Unlike the battle maids, the regular maids all wore the same uniform. However, their exact appearance varied between each maid — probably because each maid wearing them was different.

Ainz recalled something that one of his friends had said so often that it seemed to have taken up residence in his ear: “Simple maid outfits are good, but decorated maid outfits are the best”. There was also a follow-up to that: “In other words, maid uniforms are the best, no matter how they look. Maid uniforms are the greatest invention in human history. Viva maid uniforms~”

Although Ainz did not know what he meant by “viva”, it was probably some sort of exclamation. It might have also been some personally-invented term of his. In this way, Ainz recalled the memories of his past companions, bit by bit.

Ainz smiled bitterly — though his facial expression did not change, of course — and silently looked at the maid.

“Ai-Ainz-sama, is, is there some way I can serve you?”

Fifth blushed as her hands tightly gripped the apron of her uniform. It was then that Ainz realized his carelessness.

“Forgive me. It seems I was… yes , it seems I was somewhat entranced by you.”

“—!”

“Then, let’s go.”

“—Hieh? Ah, yes. Understood!”

The maid froze for a moment, but still managed an energetic reply as she fell into step behind him and they left the room.

Ainz passed through several other rooms. What he saw there could not possibly compare to the scenery in the 9th Floor of the Tomb. Thus, when Ainz had decided to stay here, the Guardians voiced their objections one after the other.

Point. This place is lacking in taste as a residence for a Supreme Being.

Point. The defensive capability of this place is lacking and it has inadequate protection against spies.

Point. Point. Point—

However, Ainz shrugged all these objections aside and selected this place as his home.

This was his responsibility as a King — after all, Jircniv too lived in the Imperial Palace of the Imperial Capital. Or at least, that was what he wanted people to think. The fact was, this place was luxurious enough for Ainz, no, for Suzuki Satoru. His old home was even less worthy of comparison. In addition, his room on the 9th Floor had always been too flashy and too large.

He did not mind it when it was still a game. However, now that he actually had to live there, he was acutely aware that there was no place for him within its walls. All Ainz wanted to do was to burrow into a corner of the room.

Ainz led Fifth and the Eight Edge Assassin that dropped down from the ceiling to the dressing room.

Several regular maids were already there waiting for Ainz. They executed respectful bows to him in unison. Fifth swiftly joined their ranks as well.

“Ainz-sama, what would you like to wear today?” Fifth asked in a voice that was bursting with energy.

...Oh, there’s a sparkle in Fifth’s eyes. Come to think of it, didn’t everyone who had this job have the same sparkle in their eyes as well? They do say that ladies like clothing… is that how they express it? Or do they just like coordinating clothes and accessories?

A steady sensation of fatigue crept over him, but he could not show it. Instead, he went “Umu” in a conceited way — or at least, that was how it felt when he practiced beforehand.

Frankly speaking, Ainz did not need to change his clothes.

His magic robes would not get wrinkled even if he spent all night rolling around on the bed. His body did not excrete any waste products. The dust floating in the air could settle on him, but all he had to do was brush it off. In addition, any place where Ainz went would have already been thoroughly cleaned by the maids. Furthermore, he did not need to eat or drink, and thus he would not get dirty from those activities.

Wearing the same set of clothes would not pose a problem to him.

However, none of his subordinates could permit that. Yet it was only to be expected; having their absolute ruler wear the same thing everyday would ruin his image.

That said, Ainz was not confident in his ability to coordinate his outfit.

Now, if he was preparing his equipment for battle, after considering his opponents’ abilities and skills and planning out his tactics, he would be quite confident in his ability to select the appropriate loadout to best combat the foe he was facing. However —

Well, to some extent, the experience gained by Suzuki Satoru allowed him to comment on whether this necktie would work with that suit. It did not let him say anything about whether this purple robe with silver filigree matched a silver necklace socketed with four diamonds and so on. In addition, he had to select clothes to match a skeletal body.

However, if he wore a mismatched outfit, people might doubt his sense of style as a leader. That would be like betraying his loyal subordinates. Therefore, Ainz had to give his utmost even in the matter of dressing himself.

Therein lay a fatal problem.

Would any of his subordinates comment even if Ainz wore something unsuitable? It was a similar situation to a toupee slipping off the head of the CEO of some large company; nobody would dare say anything.

That being the case, there was only one alternative left to him.

"—Fifth, I'll leave it to you. Prepare a set of clothing that best suits me."

"Understood! Leave it to me, Ainz-sama! Your servant will take the greatest care in her choices!"

You don't have to get so worked up over this — well, Ainz thought that, but he had never actually said so to the maids before.

"I — I think red suits you well, Ainz-sama! Therefore, I was thinking of using red as a base color for coordinating your attire. What do you think?"

"...I just said that I would leave that matter to you. That being the case, there's no need to confirm your choices with me."

"Yes! Understood!"

If he had no confidence in himself, then all he needed to do was hand the task to someone else — like how he had allowed the maid to pick for him.

Ainz was very troubled by the crimson robe she had selected, however. The red color was so bright that it almost hurt his eyes, and it was further adorned by many huge button-like gemstones. It might have been acceptable if they were all the same color, but the many gemstones reflected half a dozen different colors of light. In addition, the garment was edged with strange characters embroidered with gold thread.

—Is this really normal clothing? Can it be considered clothing in the normal sense of the word?

He felt like a sandwich-board man illuminated by neon lights. He would never have picked this clothing of his own accord. Or rather, Ainz began to wonder why he had ever bought this in the first place. Since he had no recollection of his guild members forcing it upon him, by process of elimination, he himself must have obtained it somewhere.

Was it a gift? Did I win it in a lottery or some kind of an event? … Still, well, it can't be helped, huh.

Even recalling how he had obtained it would not make the crimson robe before him vanish.

While it would be easy to simply refuse, it would turn the "I'll leave it to you" that he had told Fifth into a lie. More to the point, Ainz might be the only one who found it embarrassing while everyone else liked it. Or rather, that was quite likely to be the case.

And, to put it more bluntly, since Fifth had selected this robe, he could blame her if anyone commented on it.

I really am a terrible boss.

Ainz knew that this was not something of which he could be proud, and he felt guilty about it.

Pushing the blame to someone else was not laudable conduct for a boss — for a superior. Ainz knew this, but even so, he needed some way to preserve his dignity.

He had to protect himself by sacrificing his subordinates. It could not be helped.

"—Sorry about that."

"Ah, my sincerest apologies!"

"It's fine… I was just talking to myself. Pay it no heed. Come to think of it…"

Ainz decided to choose his words carefully as he asked his question.

"There's something I'd like to ask. Do you think this robe is a bit too gaudy for me?"

“Certainly not! After all, just about anything looks good on you, Ainz-sama! Although I feel that black as a base with dark brown as a secondary color would look good too, wearing such colors all the time would not show off your other virtues, Ainz-sama! All this is to imprint your powerful image into the eyes of everyone who—”

Ainz interrupted the gushing flow of her words.

“—It’s fine. As long as it’s suitable, it’s fine. Then, could you dress me?”

“Understood!”

Fifth and the other maids got to work.

As Ainz remained standing, the maids silently removed Ainz’s clothing. The act of having his clothes changed by women, even if his body was nothing more than a skeleton, filled him with a burning shame.

But of course, such a gesture was a natural act for an absolute ruler.

At least, it was that way for Jircniv. Ainz had also read the same thing in one of his books.

Ainz remained still and allowed the maids to work, while he silently looked into the dressing mirror.

Soon, a red-robed Ainz appeared in the mirror. As expected, it was gaudy. It was nothing but gaudy.

...No. This world has a pretty divergent sense of aesthetics. For all I know… these clothes might be quite suitable for a ruler to wear.

He recalled Hamsuke as an example, and quashed his unease.

“Then, let’s go.”

Those thoughts went through his head as he strode forth, accompanied by Fifth. How he wished he had the time to sigh.

♦ ♦ ♦

The swaying, gaudy red robe advanced toward his office. As Ainz neared the door, Fifth swiftly darted forward and courteously opened it for him.

Sometimes, he thought of saying, *It's just a door, let me open it*. However, as he watched the look on the maids' faces which said, "Whoa, look at me, I'm working!", Ainz could do nothing but accept this as a form of automatically-opening door.

Ainz led Fifth and the Eight Edge Assassin into the office.

The desk in the center of the room was like the one Ainz had in his own room, and it radiated an air of gravitas.

It had been brought here from Nazarick, along with his bed. A flag hung in the depths of the room — the flag of Ainz Ooal Gown — of the Sorcerous Kingdom.

Ainz passed through the room, and approached the balcony.

There was a glass box on the balcony. It was not very large and contained a jungle environment. Ainz inserted his bony finger into the box, which seemed devoid of life, and lifted up a leaf. Hidden beneath was a creature that hid in the darkness to avoid the sunlight.

Its brightly-colored body was coated with sticky yet slippery secretions, and the front part of its body resembled a pair of human lips.

Ainz carefully studied the Lip Bug before his eyes.

"—That's a good color. You look quite lively."

He remembered what he had been once told, which was that color was very important. He also recalled having several Lip Bugs placed in front of him, and being taught to tell when they were most energetic by their color. And indeed; the Lip Bug before him seemed much livelier than the others at that time.

Ainz picked out a fresh cabbage leaf from a nearby plate.

“Come, Nurunuru-kun. It’s time to eat~”

He brought the leaf close to the Lip Bug, which latched onto it with a *nom*. After he let go of the leaf, the Lip Bug frantically took large mouthfuls out of it.

Ainz brought out two more leaves, which the Lip Bug readily devoured as well.

He decided to stop there, because Entoma had told him that overfeeding it was not good,.

Ainz gently returned the fed and happy Lip Bug to its shaded home in the glass box — to the place it loved the most .

“It seemed a little gross at first, but after taking care of it for a while, it’s grown to be quite cute.”

He was not speaking to anyone in particular, just talking to himself. Ainz had a cheerful smile on his face as he closed the thin box lid. The box was not very sturdy, and the Lip Bug could escape if it really wanted to. The reason Ainz used it was to prove his confidence in being able to take good care of its occupant. That said, it was a mercenary monster spawned with gold, so the question of whether or not it would escape still had no answer.

Ainz gently cleaned his hand with a nearby cloth, and after finishing all his tasks for the morning, he took a seat in his chair. He leaned his weight onto its back and let his body sink in deeply.

...Ah, work. There’s no official working hours, but my heart still sinks around this time. I guess old habits die hard.

The desk did not have so much as a speck of dust on it, to say nothing of documents.

It was completely unlike Suzuki Satoru’s desk.

All this was because he did not need to work through the night. Ainz's job was to make the big decisions, not worrying about the fine details. After he decided the overall direction, his subordinates went into action.

...Still, this is why it's so difficult. For the first time, I realise that the difficulty of a job is determined by how much responsibility it places on oneself. It's more mentally than physically tiring… and it's certainly more stressful. Ah, is it time to start work?

There was no need to look at a watch.

At that precise moment, a knock came from the door. Fifth — who was standing at attention by the door — verified the identity of the caller.

"Ainz-sama, it is Albedo-sama and the Elder Liches."

There was respect in Fifth's voice, because these Elder Liches were Ainz's personal creations.

"I see. They may enter."

Fifth stepped away from the door to make way for the visitors. Albedo entered the room at the head of six Elder Liches.

"Good morning, Ainz-sama."

After Albedo's greeting, the Elder Liches bowed their heads deeply.

"Umu, good morning, Albedo. It seems today's weather is quite fine."

"Indeed it is. I have reports that it will be sunny all day — of course, if it is your wish as the ultimate ruler of this world, we can produce any kind of weather you desire. Shall we proceed, Ainz-sama?"

This was just using an irrelevant topic to begin a conversation, but he did not expect her to start off with a suggestion like that.

"That will not be necessary. I like changes in the weather. Sunny days are fine, the roaring of thunder on rainy days is to be savored, and the gentle falling of snow is quite intriguing. One could say that one could draw a day's entertainment just from watching the natural changes of the weather."

Ainz did not dislike this world's changing climate. In this unspoiled world, he found that he understood his former comrade Blue Planet's words: "The rain was originally Nature's blessing."

It was best to let nature remain natural.

"Yes, understood... Of course, I sensed that you had no desire to alter the weather, but I had to ask to be sure, Ainz-sama. After all, you are not the sort of leader who would directly order us around to satisfy your desires."

"...Is that so? It doesn't feel like that to me…"

Ainz thought about it, but he could not come up with anything he particularly wanted. When he was still Suzuki Satoru, his mind was filled with thoughts of YGGDRASIL. After his body had become like this, it had only gotten worse. Although he was not sure if that was a side effect of becoming an undead creature, the chance of always having been this way was quite high. If he had to speak of a desire for anything, it would be a desire for collecting rare items. And also—

Ainz smiled in loneliness, and gently shook his head.

"No, it might be just as you say. However, that is simply because there is nothing I truly want. If I develop any desires, I will naturally give the appropriate orders at that time."

"When the time comes, I hope you will allow me, as the Guardian Overseer, to select the people who will immediately respond to your desires," Albedo replied as she lowered her head. When it came back up, her face appeared somewhat flushed. "However, your clothes today are quite spectacular. They are extraordinarily radiant. No, they shine this brightly because you are wearing them, Ainz-sama."

Albedo continued lavishing her praise on him.

The radiance of which she spoke of was probably the gemstones which seemed to substitute for buttons, since his skull did not reflect the light. Ainz nodded as he thought about this.

“Is that so, then I must thank you for that, Albedo.”

“You are too kind. I was simply stating the obvious. Ainz-sama, you are truly—”

Ainz raised his hand to interrupt Albedo as she excitedly prepared to continue. He had the feeling that letting her go on would drag the conversation out for a long time.

“Let’s leave that matter aside for now. Then, what of the documents you and the others were handling yesterday, Albedo?”

“Yes.”

Albedo puffed up her cheeks in an adorable manner, and the Elder Liches followed her directions and placed their documents on the table.

The pile of documents stacked one on top of the other came to a sizable thickness. The files themselves did not contain much in the way of proposals, but they had a lot of supporting documents attached to them. Much like how he needed data from many fields in his old job, it would seem that this was all in preparation to deal with a complicated problem.

He had prepared his heart for this. Ainz had spent all morning psyching himself up and stiffening his resolve for this moment.

Suzuki Satoru was a mere employee, and he was not the sort who interacted with the company’s operations. If asked whether someone like that could manage an entire country, Ainz would have confidently answered “no”. Or rather, even an operations manager would find it very difficult to run a country.

What made it worse was that Ainz was an absolute ruler. Even if there were any mistakes in the words he spoke, his subordinates would rally together to turn them into reality.

Was there anything scarier than that? A single word from Ainz might lead to a mass suicide.

That being the case, what should he do?

The answer was very simple. Much like his clothes, he had to hand that responsibility to capable people.

Being able to skilfully allocate one's subordinates according to their strengths was also an essential quality in a boss.

That said, there were also problems with completely delegating everything to others. Indeed, he could rest assured if everything was left to Albedo's care. However, he was a king, not a mere figurehead. As someone in a high position, being a superior accordingly entailed bearing a superior's responsibilities.

There were some tasks which could not be escaped by saying "I know nothing."

As such, Ainz began carefully reading the stack of documents from top to bottom, placing the royal seal on each one.

After rhythmically stamping several documents, Ainz paused, having selected one of them as the day's target. He opened it to peruse its contents. And then—

...I don't get it, after all. Does this have something to do with material resources? Is this very important? Do the Elder Liches really understand? ...Well, they were all made by me… how can this difference in ability be explained — although, reading all this is really tiresome, it's just like reading legal documents...

Because there were cross-references to other pages, there were many repetitions of these few words which required repeatedly flipping back and forth between pages. The final point was based on the previous conclusion in order to arrive at a negative judgment. Moreover, because many negative statements appeared in the text, interpreting the content was very difficult.

"—Albedo."

"Yes, Ainz-sama! Has something caught your attention?"

"No, it's unrelated to this, but I thought of something. How goes the enactment of laws?"

This country was called the Sorcerous Kingdom, but it had not passed any unique legislation, instead continuing the use of the Kingdom's old laws.

"Yes. This is simply a draft for now. If we pushed the new laws too aggressively it could lead to widespread discontent. Thus, we are unsure whether or not to do so."

These words sounded strange when they came from Albedo, who cared nothing for humanity. Still, Ainz could not help but pat his chest in relief.

"Although I've discussed it with Demiurge before… the laws of the Kingdom simply do not grant enough power to an absolute ruler such as yourself, Ainz-sama. We are currently considering simply retaining the first edict of the Kingdom's law and then pushing it through by force."

"While I am more confident in other areas…"

That was a bald-faced lie — Ainz had no confidence in just about everything.

"I regret to say that I am not versed in the ways of the law. Do as you see fit. You have my complete trust."

"Yes! I understand."

Albedo had a look of delight on her face. If Ainz looked closely, he could see her wings quivering behind her. She — and Demiurge, for some unknown reason — seemed to consider Ainz to be a genius who was always one step ahead of them.

Thus, when Ainz said he did not know or something along those lines, he could keenly understand the joy which they — who were made as highly intelligent beings — felt at being able to validate their existence.

"Still, there's no need to lie about not understanding the law…"

"No, it's true. I'm not adept at dealing with matters of the law."

"I see… that must be how you see it, from the perspective of a supreme leader who has never been bound by any laws. I understand your meaning."

Ainz felt that he was being misunderstood, but he decided to ignore the matter. After all, he had no idea how to explain it to her. Instead, he simply smiled. This feeling was only vaguely familiar to him, but that might be how children felt when proudly showing off their talents to their parents.

"Is something wrong?"

Albedo's look of surprise only made Ainz that much more delighted. Still, it would be rude for the joy to be all his.

"Forgive me, but when I saw how happy you were, I was struck by how cute you looked… how shall I say this, umu, it's somewhat difficult to explain."

As he said that, there was a brief burst of movement from the Eight Edge Assassins on the roof, but then they stayed still.

"Ah~, how embarrassing."

Albedo pressed her hands to her cheeks. As Ainz saw how she blushed, he realised how uncomfortable he must have made her feel, and with a slight cough, he decided to study the documents before him instead.

It would seem that his way of treating the NPCs as the children of his friends made him say things which embarrassed them.

He felt a little guilty about his rudeness, but in the end, he stamped the final document instead. With that, one task was complete.

He handed the files to Albedo, who was covering her mouth with her hand. She in turn handed them to the Elder Liches.

"Then, let's begin the usual. These are the proposals we will screen through today."

Ainz opened his cabinet and took out a stack of papers. These were suggestions and opinions collected from everyone in Nazarick in order to aid in the development of the Sorcerous Kingdom.

After reading them, Ainz would copy these suggestions out and read them out for Albedo to hear around this time every morning.

“There’s no need for you to waste your valuable time with petty tasks like writing them all down, Ainz-sama.”

“No, because there might be some suggestions in there which are directed at me. In addition, my body does not require sleep. It would be a waste of time if I did nothing.”

That too was a lie. Or rather, it was true that he would be left idle if he did nothing. However, he could spend that time on things like reading, bathing, practicing his acting skills and simulated combat. Even so, he still had to do this by hand because Ainz was sneaking in his own suggestions among the others.

Ainz had to do this because if he made those suggestions directly, his subordinates would force themselves to make them happen, even if they were impractical. That could lead to tragic consequences.
Therefore, by anonymously submitting his suggestions, he hoped that Albedo, as an impartial third party, would judge them by their merits alone. In addition, by not disclosing the names of the suggesters, Ainz’s own abilities would not be called into question, which was like killing two birds with one stone.

Ainz began reading the uppermost suggestion out loud.

“Muu… ‘I believe that we need child education services which can scout out talented individuals and cultivate them. This way, we might be able to strengthen Nazarick. Even if it does not work out, we can still use it to develop technologies for ourself, which can also be used as a foundation to strengthen Nazarick as well.’ Something like that.”

Ainz looked at Albedo, who was standing with her eyes facing forward.

“The benefits are clearly outlined, and it is an excellent suggestion. One can sense the suggester’s excellence through it. It might be good to circulate this as a model for others to study.”

After that round of praise, Ainz resumed his usual stern countenance — though of course his face did not move. “Come to think of it, who do you think wrote that?”

“I believe that would be Yuri Alpha.”

It was an instant answer. Ainz felt the same way as well.

“I agree. It should be Yuri’s suggestion. Then, Albedo, what do you think of that suggestion?”

“It is utterly foolish. Swine should live like swine and die after giving everything they have for their breeders. There is no need for them to live in any other way. Since there is no meaning in allowing them to live differently, there is no point in allowing them to choose differently.”

“Well, that was quite a harsh way of looking at it, but I do agree, to an extent. One needs basic education in order to serve as a cog to turn in society’s wheels. This is how people should live, age and die. Allowing technology to spread would only threaten our power — umu?”

“Ainz-sama, are you alright?”

“I recall having heard these words before. Someone said them to someone else, but who? Narberal and… ah, Lupusregina. When she was asking about the healing potions… I guess there is no need to tell you since you already know, Albedo. Oh, what a gaffe, please pay it no heed.”

“Of, of course not, I believe that I need to understand your profound insights, Ainz-sama. Please, share them with me.”

“Is, is that so.. Well, although it embarrasses me somewhat, I can’t be the only one sharing my thoughts. If you are unhappy with anything you hear, please feel free to correct me.”

There was nothing more embarrassing than acting like a know-it-all in front of someone he knew well. With the worry of being treated like an idiot in his heart, Ainz decided to share his thoughts on the matter.

Knowledge, education and information were the basic weapons of humanity — which also included non-human beings in this world. As a nation's knowledge increased, so would its power, but on the flip side, so would resentment at knowing they could not have everything.

Thus, a ruler had to consider whether or not to arm the masses with the weapon called knowledge, because that weapon might someday be pointed at the ruler himself.

In the game called YGGDRASIL, Ainz had learned the importance of possessing information. This was why he had brought the two Bareare herbalists to Carne Village, where he could keep an eye on them, and had them make potions there. This was so that he could monopolize the fruits of their research and hoard any knowledge gained from it.

From Ainz's point of view, those who were ruled over ought to act the part, living and dying in their ignorance. However one needed to develop new technologies as a nation's power increased. In the end, the question was at whom would the spears of knowledge be pointed.

"In short, we should only share our new technologies with those who are absolutely loyal to the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. We will give the common folk outdated technology which poses no threat to us. The "Fruit of Knowledge" only has value when we alone possess it."

After he got to that part, he sneaked a peek at Albedo, to make sure she did not doubt or distrust him.

"And now, this is what I'm really getting at. Albedo, in contrast to what I just said, I think we should accept this suggestion."

Albedo's eyes went wide for a moment.

"May I know what led you to that conclusion?"

“Sentimentality. In addition, I feel Yuri has a point.”

“Still, I feel there are too many demerits to that suggestion… or are you saying that you intend to test it out in the outskirts? Once you seal off all information leaks and then commence education through brainwashing, the merits do start to appear.”

“We will not do that. Though this might deviate somewhat from Yuri’s suggestion, we shall found an orphanage in this city.”

While Ainz had been living here as Momon, he had heard of the orphanages run by the temples. He had immediately hit on the idea of founding an orphanage in the name of Ainz Ooal Gown.

“In any event, we should consider the possibility of Nazarick’s technology leaking into the outside world. It should be fine if we run a regular orphanage and limit the knowledge we teach there to those close to us. If we find talented individuals there, we can then consider what to do with them.”

“...I see. That arrangement should not pose any problems.”

“Then, I intend to use widows for the orphanage staff.”

“The women who lost their husbands in the battle where you demonstrated a fraction of your almighty power. It serves as financial aid of sorts for those women who are struggling below the poverty line. And indeed, such aid will only improve the popular opinion of yourself… as expected of you, Ainz-sama.”

“Umu, though if we only act after Momon tells us of the widows’ plight, then only his reputation will improve, and not mine. Thus, we must take action swiftly, before anyone can come to him for help. In order to accomplish this… I order Pestonya and Nigredo to be released from their confinement.”

Ainz sensed a faint glint in Albedo’s eyes.

“Forgive my directness… but if you grant amnesty to those who have been judged guilty of disobeying your command and forgive them, I fear it might disrupt the order in Nazarick.”

“Did we not place them in confinement for that?”

“That is far too mild a punishment. Your will is everything to us, Ainz-sama. The crime of disobeying your command is utterly unforgivable. Your servant submits that they should be relieved of their heads as a warning to others.”

“If it’s for those—”

Ainz wanted to say that it was a petty matter, but the women were all motivated by their reverence for Ainz — one of the 41 Supreme Beings. If would be quite tragic to deny their loyalty.

Still, that was why he had to forgive the two of them. Their personalities were created by Ainz’s past friends. Thus, Pestonya and Nigredo’s actions could be said to speak for his friends.

Ainz knew that if he gave Albedo an order, she would obey it without question. However, that was a last resort for him. First, he had to try to persuade her with words.

“—The fact is that allowing those orders to leak out to the outside world would be problematic. Anyone would be able to connect the dots and trace the incident in the Royal Capital back to Nazarick, hiding in the shadows. That was why even the young children had to be eliminated.

However, the two of them were only trying to defend those infants who had no memories of the incident, which meant that there was no need to eliminate them. One could also say that they accurately understood my intentions.”

“They were simply twisting the facts for their own convenience. Their actions are unforgivable.”

“Albedo—”

He understood Albedo's feelings as the Guardian Overseer. That was why he had to think as hard as he could to convince her.

Ainz smiled; a troubled, bitter smile. Of course, his expression did not change.

"Ainz-sama, that look of yours is too unfair…" Albedo muttered, with somewhat pink cheeks. Ainz patted his face, as if to check.

"Oh, really now?"

"Mm, that is…"

Albedo sighed powerlessly, and let her head droop down. *Haa~,* she went as she exhaled deeply.

When she lifted her head up again, she had returned to normal.

"I understand. Nothing is more important than your wishes, Ainz-sama. They are everything to me. Please direct me as you see fit."

"I do not want you to obey me because of your feelings. I want you to obey me because it is the sensible thing to do."

"That will not be a problem. In all likelihood, nobody in Nazarick will object to freeing those two other than my previous self."

"Is that so… then that's good. Put the two of them in charge of running the orphanage."

"I understand. I shall convey your instructions to them."

"I'll leave that to you. Then — the next suggestion."

Ainz murmured to himself. The next suggestion was one he had written.

"...Ahem. Well, this isn't a terribly good suggestion… eh, it can't be helped."

Ainz snuck a peek at Albedo's expression and continued to speak.

“Let us make a uniform for athletic activities (gym clothes) to strengthen the unity of Nazarick. What do you think?”

Just as he finished speaking, Albedo furrowed her brows in anger.

"...If there was a lower limit to the definition of the word 'inferior', that idea has certainly managed to break through it. Who made that suggestion, anyway?”

Ainz made a supreme effort to check his impulse to go, “I’m sorry” and instead took on a troubled expression.

“Er, that — I’m not quite sure. I disposed of the original sheet of paper.”

“I cannot imagine how put upon you must have been. How could anyone waste your precious time with such an utterly idiotic suggestion, Ainz-sama? Let us immediately launch an investigation to root out this person and determine the appropriate punishment.”

“...No! There’s no need for that! Listen, Albedo! You must not do that, no matter what!”

Though he was going “awawawa” in his heart, Ainz managed to thrust out his chest:

“I have told everyone in Nazarick that in order to encourage feedback from many angles, I will not censure them for any kind of suggestion made to me. If you rebuke them for it, that would turn my words into lies. That would also mean that everything I say in future would also be a lie.

In addition, it is difficult for frightened people to give their opinions… therefore, I hope that once you leave this room, you will forget that suggestion.”

“Yes, I shall. It is as you say, Ainz-sama.”

“Good, good. You must do that.”

Ainz was deeply grateful for the fact that his body could not sweat. If that was not the case, the floor would have probably been drenched by now. However, despite the marvelous constitution of his body and mind, the word “inferior” stuck deep in his heart, leaving a wound that would not heal for a long time.

“...Ainz-sama, I have a proposition. In the future, please allow me to select the suggestions. That way, you will not be troubled by such foolish suggestions a second time.”

“Guh… no, there’s no need to trouble you with that. Besides, if you selected all of them, then my role would merely be to sign off on your choices. Our discussions here would then become meaningless.”

“Ah, yes, that’s right, Ainz-sama. We must work closely together and do it.”

Albedo’s wings flapped, and the Eight Edge Assassins overhead squirmed once more.

“All, all right. Since you understand, let’s move on to the next one, Albedo.”

Personally, he did not think that suggestion was unworkable, but the mood in the air was not one which would allow him to bring that up, nor did he feel confident enough to mention another similar topic.

“Then, next—”

Just as Ainz was about to continue reading, a knocking sound came from the door.

Both of them looked at Fifth. She bowed slightly, and then went to see who the visitors were.

A lively child’s voice came through the gap in the door, along with an almost inaudible voice that lacked any confidence.

...Isn’t this the first time those two have come here at this hour of the day? Did something happen? If that’s the case, then it’s probably good that Albedo is here too.

Since Ainz already knew who the visitors were, he could have immediately allowed them entry. However, Fifth seemed quite happy to be performing her duties, and granting them permission to enter before she could report their names would mean having to interrupt her.

Going over her head might make her lose the motivation to work. It was important for people on top to understand and take these matters into account.

I guess Jircniv does this too. After all, he leaves a lot of things to his maids, Ainz thought, as he commented on the role model as a king whom he had been constantly studying.

At some point, I should have a relaxed chat with him about the burdens of rulership.

“Ainz-sama, they are Aura-sama and Mare-sama.”

Now that she had completed her orders, Ainz indicated that the two of them were permitted to enter his office.

The door opened, and a pair of petite dark elves stepped in. Their beaming smiles did not seem to imply that anything troublesome had happened, and Ainz was relieved.

“Morning! Ainz-sama!”

“G-g-good morning, Ainz-sama.”

“Ah, good morning. The two of you look quite lively today.”

The two of them greeted Albedo as well. Aura went around the table and stationed herself next to Ainz.

Once she was very close to him, she stuck out both hands, making two V-for-Victory signs.

“Hm.”

She did not say anything to the baffled Ainz, merely raised her hands and made the signs.

Her sparkly eyes, so full of anticipation, trained themselves on him, and then she began hopping from foot to foot.

After realising what she wanted, Ainz pulled his chair back, grabbed Aura under the armpits, and picked her up.

“What, what are you doing, Ainz-sama—”

Ainz paid no head to Albedo’s strangled cry of surprise. Instead, he turned Aura a full 180 degrees, facing her back to him, and then he sat her down onto his right thighbone.

Unlike a normal thigh, bones were hard, so Ainz had to place her parallel to it, allowing Aura’s soft rump to cushion her.

“Ehehe~”

It was a somewhat bashful, yet thoroughly delighted laugh from Aura, and Ainz returned it with a smile. Then, he turned and beckoned to the nervous-looking Mare.

He picked up Mare as he approached, and placed him on his left thighbone.

“Ah, um, Ai-Ainz-sama, what, what about me?”

As Ainz wondered whether he should get them a cushion of some sort, it was Albedo’s turn to speak nervously. However, it was too embarrassing to let a grown woman sit on his thigh — his thighbone.

“No, that… I can’t.”

“But, but, the two of them…”

“...Albedo, these two are just children. You’re an adult, are you not?”

For a moment, he thought he saw something behind Albedo — a flash of light that was the physical manifestation of the blow she had just suffered. Although he felt a little sorry for her, embarrassment was still embarrassment. Besides, if he actually followed through with the act, it would be sexual harassment.

“Then, you two. What’s going on?”

The fortress in the Great Forest of Tob — the fake Nazarick, or perhaps a resource depot — had been completed for now.

Aura’s next task was to conceal the fortress and strengthen its defenses.

The original plan was to flee there if enemies showed up and conceal the real Nazarick, but Jircniv now knew the location of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.

That being the case, it would now serve as a bunker and a resource depot.

Mare, on the other hand, had been tasked to dig an underground tomb on the outskirts of E-Rantel.

There were no plans to utilize that facility right away. It was simply because he had the manpower to spare but nowhere to use it.

The use of humans for such work would incur labor costs, but golems and the undead did not have that problem. In addition, they could use Mare’s magic to produce simple stonework.

Incidentally, among the other Guardians, Shalltear was assigned to [Gate]-related teleportation duties and the security of Nazarick. Cocytus was in charge of the Lizardman village and its nearby lake. Demiurge, on the other hand, was on an assignment to the Holy Kingdom.

In other words, all the Guardians in E-Rantel were now in this room.

Since their tasks had already been allocated, what were the two of them doing here?

Aura cheerfully answered Ainz's question:

"We came here to see you, Ainz-sama!"

Her innocent words brought a beaming smile to Ainz's face.

"I see. Well, I am very delighted to see the two of you as well."

Ainz patted Aura's head. Aura seemed to find it very comfortable, and nuzzled back into Ainz's hand. It was kind of like playing with an adorable puppy.

"Then, then. Ainz-sama, w-what are you doing? I, I hope we aren't causing you trouble…"

"Yes—"

"Certainly not. How could meeting you be any trouble to me?" Ainz gently replied to Mare.

Ainz then turned to Albedo.

"Forgive me, Albedo. I got sidetracked just as we were about to start on a new topic. Ah, that's right, I feel the same way about meeting you as well."

"Y-yes," Albedo said, her face turned as red as an apple as she pouted and tried to look serious.

"Ainz-sama!"

What is it? Ainz thought as his eyes went wide.

"Ogyaa!"

Ainz wondered if he had misheard something. What did she just say?

As though to inform Ainz that his hearing was fine, Albedo went "Ogyaa!!" again, in a terribly shy voice.

...She's probably trying to act like a baby. No, the scary thing would be if she tried to act like anything else. Still, why is she doing this? Is she tired from working too hard? Ah! This might have something to do with Nigredo and releasing her from confinement.

Confusion overwhelmed Ainz, despite his undead body, and at the same time, Mare began shifting uneasily in his seat.

"That, um, it, it's fine for me, so, um, I should let Albedo-sama…"

Those words were like a revelation to him.

Just now, I said that it was fine because they were kids, so as an adult, you ought to be able to bear with it. Is that why she's pretending to be a kid now?

Still, why a baby? And besides, letting Albedo sit on my thigh is too...

That said, she's gone to such embarrassing lengths to put herself forward. I can't just overlook that, both as a superior being and as a man. In addition, Albedo is one of the children, like Aura and Mare. I must be fair to her.

"Forgive me, Mare," Ainz said. Having resolved himself, he let Mare alight from his leg and beckoned Albedo.

"Come here, Albedo."

"Yes!"

Albedo's shyness from earlier vanished like mist in the morning sun, replaced by a look of anticipation which a puppy might have just before going for a walk. In an instant, Albedo moved to Ainz's side.

Albedo made the V-signs as well.

It was somewhat difficult for Ainz to do while seated, but he nevertheless placed his hands under her armpits and lifted her up.

"...Um, sorry about this. Would you mind just sitting down as you are?"

“Of course! Understood!”

Albedo took Mare’s place on Ainz’s left thigh, and shifted herself in a coquettish manner.

The first thing Ainz felt was her softness. Unlike the children, it was the softness of a mature body. Then, her warmth flowed into him, which made him itch a little.

Even so, she's still really soft!

She was a level 100 warrior, but he had no idea where her muscles had gone. One could phrase it in a less polite way and wonder if she was a mollusc.

"Kufufufu~"

He heard Albedo's quiet laughter.

A fragrance wafted over from Albedo's long hair. It tickled Ainz's nose.

"—Mm?"

In this moment, something sparked inside Ainz's nonexistent brain.

This scent is familiar; where have I smelled it before? Albedo's clothes? No, her perfume?

Ainz was quite sure he had encountered the scent Albedo was currently emitting in the past. However, he had no idea where he had first picked it up, and he could not remember the details.

"Mmm… Albedo. Are you using some kind of perfume?"

"Yes, I do use perfume. Does it displease you?"

"No, of course not, it smells nice."

Albedo hurriedly turned her face towards Ainz. Her bulging eyes frightened Ainz a little.

"Really, Ainz-sama! If you'd like, how about sniffing me? An hour would be fine, a whole day would be fine too!"

"No, besides, an hour would be too…"

Still, no matter what he said, it was a fact that he was quite interested. Besides, if he sniffed her, he might be able to recall more details about that scent.

“Then, may I sniff a little?”

Ainz carefully brought his skull close to Albedo and inhaled her aroma. Since he was closer to her than just now, he could smell that pleasing scent more clearly. As he thought, it *was* familiar, but he still could not place where he had encountered it before. Just as Ainz was racking his brains to solve the mystery in his head, a cold voice reached his ears.

“...Ainz-sama.”

Although he had no idea who it was for a moment, that voice clearly belonged to Aura. Ainz nervously turned to look at her, and saw that Aura was pouting with her cheeks puffed with.

“That looks kind of perverted.”

“Ah, sorry…”

She did have a point...

Ainz cursed himself for doing something like this in front of the children. This would have a bad effect on their sexual education.This was why she had addressed him in the same tone that his old friend did when she was angry at her little brother.

“Th-then, Albedo, Aura. Please get up. Oh, Albedo, let’s continue discussing that matter from just now.”

However, there was no movement.

Both of them remained still. They were waiting for the other side to get off first.

“Good grief…”

Ainz picked up Aura and placed her on the ground next to him. A quiet laugh of "Kufufufu~" came from Albedo's side.

"...Aura was the one who sat down first. Albedo, you'd best get down as well."

"But, but… Aura's been sitting for 3 minutes and 41 seconds. I've only been sitting for 57 seconds. Though it may sound foolish, I believe I should be allowed to sit for another three minutes."

"Haven't you spent more time meeting with Ainz-sama already?"

"It can't be helped, that was work."

"Oh, work, is it? You just came to meet him for work? *I* came all the way here just to see Ainz-sama, you know."

"!!"

Albedo wiggled her rump on Ainz's thigh, adjusting her position to stare Aura in the eye.

Ainz thought, *I can guess why Albedo wanted to sit on my thigh, but why did Aura want to do that? It's not like she loves me like Albedo does.*

He could not remember what he had done to make a girl like Aura love him. The feeling called love should have been a mystery to Aura. And then — Ainz finally found the answer.

"I see. So she was being possessive."

In addition, she might long for a father's love. Aura and Mare were designed as children, and they were still at an age where their parents would care for them. Perhaps they were unconsciously looking at Ainz to fill that gap in their hearts.

If there was a country of Dark Elves, he had considered the possibility of sending them over to make friends. However, Suzuki Satoru had not experienced a father's love himself, so he felt it might be a bit late for that.

I wonder if there are books for children's sex education in the library?

It had been fine when they were just data. However, he had been thinking up till now, and noticed that there were still some things missing in order for Aura and Mare's healthy mental growth.

As I thought, they really need to make Dark Elf friends! Let's make that a priority. That being the case—

"Aura. There is something I'd like to ask; what happened to the three Elves I left with you and Mare?"

"You mean the Elves who set foot in Nazarick but who were pardoned by your mercy, Ainz-sama?"

Ainz nodded.

When he had drawn those workers in, he handed the Elven slaves following them to Aura and Mare. Normally, anyone who entered Nazarick without invitation would not be allowed to leave with their lives. However, they probably had not been there of their own will, and they had no intention of taking the treasures of Nazarick for their own. That being the case, it was not unreasonable to show them some measure of kindness.

In addition, if they were Wood Elves, they would probably have a beneficial effect on Aura and Mare's development.

"Yes. For the moment, we've put them all on our Floor."

"Where are they?

"Yes. How shall I say this… they have nothing to do, but keep trying to take care of us. It's kind of annoying how they keep hanging around us."

"That, that's right. Like, our, our clothes and so on. I, I can dress myself, but they keep coming over to help me…"

"You need to pull yourself together. They keep trying to dress you because you keep acting like that. Look at me, I don't have that problem, no?"

I see, so they wish to do something. Just like the maids around me. I feel your pain, Mare. Still, that means the three people I rescued aren't completely useless, after all. Would it be bad for former slaves to teach sex education? Hm~"

"Well, we did save their lives. Don't kill them on impulse, even if you're mad. If you feel they're truly troublesome, tell me and I'll send them somewhere else."

"Got it! I'll let you know when the time comes."

Ainz glanced at Mare, who had his head lowered, and muttered "What," to himself. Then, he shifted a somewhat icy look to Albedo.

"Albedo, it's about time to get off. It's been over three minutes now."

Albedo looked disappointed for a moment, but she still obediently dismounted from Ainz's thigh without saying anything.

"Come to think of it, what were you two doing, Ainz-sama?"

"Hm? Ahhh. I gathered suggestions from people in Nazarick on how to make this country great. Ah, that's right. You two as well. If you've got any good ideas, why not give it a try. I'll listen to anything, you know?"

Aura's face lit up.

"If you say so, Ainz-sama! I have a great idea!"

"Hohoh — And what would that be, Aura? Come, tell me."

"Yes! I think boys should dress like girls, and girls should dress like boys!"

...Bukubukuchagama—!

Ainz screamed the name of one of his old friends internally.

For a moment, Ainz even saw the phantom image of a Pink Slime going "Sor~ry!" in an adorable voice that was completely at odds with its appearance.

"I see. So that was Bukubukuchagama-sama's idea. It is certainly an excellent proposal. Moreover, in this country, any decision of the Supreme Beings will surely be the correct one."

Correct? Ainz wanted to make fun of Albedo, but he could not do it.

In any case, this idea could not be allowed to happen. However, there was a problem with that.

The two of them only dressed like that because Bukubukuchagama designed them that way. If Ainz denied Aura's idea, he would then have to explain the exact reason why to the others.

Ainz could not immediately think of such an explanation.

"Ainz-sama. Shall we implement Aura's suggestion immediately?"

Why are you making the decision so quickly?!

He was out of time.

If he agreed to this suggestion, it would be declaring to all parties inside and outside the country that the Sorcerous Kingdom of Nazarick was a nation that valued cross-dressing. That would be incredibly bad. Perhaps only Bukubukuchagama would be interested in that. No, if Bukubukuchagama was in this world, Ainz felt she would definitely not want to make a country like that.

If they knew the NPCs had developed their own egos, some people would be intrigued and want to meet them, while others would want to avoid them. Bukubukuchagama would probably fall into the latter group. Yamaiko and Ankoro Mochimochi would probably want to meet them. Why is it they're so different despite them all being girls...

As he reminisced about them, Ainz slowly rose and looked out the window. Of course, that action had no special significance. He was simply trying to buy himself time. Once he had a rough idea of what he was going to say, Ainz turned to look at the three of them.

“I cannot possibly allow that idea.”

“Why, why is that?”

Of course they’d ask that, right? ...I mean, giving single men masks on Christmas would still be a better law than that...

Ainz sighed. Of course, that action had no special significance. He was simply trying to buy himself time.

“There are many complex reasons for that, Albedo. Do you need me to explain each and every one of them?”

“Y-yes. P-please, if you don’t mind.”

Ainz was planning to say that to Albedo, but Mare was the one who intercepted it instead. *He’s normally such an honest boy; why’s he being so wicked now,* Ainz thought sadly. If it was Albedo, she would have definitely said, “There’s no need for that. Allow me to explain to the two of you on Ainz-sama’s behalf”. But under these circumstances, Ainz had to do it himself.

“...Is that so. Then, I shall enlighten you. But where shall I start from to make it easy to understand…?”

Umu, Ainz went as he supported his chin with his hand. Needless to say, that too was to buy himself time. Ainz desperately forced himself to think, so hard that he thought his brain would start sweating, and then an idea struck him.

“—Firstly, ah yes, that should be it. The two of you must feel that because you’re dressed that way, the entire country must dress like you as well, am I right? After all, you must feel that such was Bukubukuchagama-san’s will. However, that would be incorrect. —Yes, the two of you are special.”

“We’re special?!”

“Indeed you are. The two of you are special to Bukubukuchagama-san. That is why you have been permitted to dress in that way… so do you intend to grant that specialness to many people that you do not know?”

"How could we?!"

The person who had retorted so loudly was — surprisingly enough — Mare.

"Never! I'll never let anyone but Nee-chan have Bukubukuchagama-sama's specialness!"

"That, that's right. That's how it is. Do you understand, Aura?"

"Yes! I was so stupid that I didn't think about how Bukubukuchagama-sama felt!"

"Also…"

Aura and Mare had already accepted that reasoning. It should be fine to slowly exit the topic now. However, there was one more thing that worried Ainz.

Ainz muttered something about there being several other reasons, and he peeked at Albedo as he murmured.

Someone as extraordinary as her would probably have thought further ahead than Ainz. Would she find it strange if he terminated the topic now? That was what made Ainz uneasy.

As their eyes met, Albedo smiled, and then inclined her neck.

Not knowing what that response meant, Ainz averted his eyes. And then, there just happened to be an Elder Lich in front of him. Ainz nonchalantly eyed the files he was holding.

"—Ahhh. So you were thinking about that too, Ainz-sama. After all, you were looking at that document the most. It should be alright to tell the two of them as well, right?"

Ainz turned to Albedo again as she suddenly spoke.

"—Umu. So you thought of it too, Albedo."

“Yes, I did. I was wondering if you were going to mention that idea as well, Ainz-sama. I believe what you are thinking about is whether or not to explain to the two of them, am I right?”

“As expected of you, Albedo. You know my thoughts without the need for me to speak them.”

“You are too kind,”

Albedo smiled and lowered her head. On the other hand, Aura puffed up her cheeks in annoyance.

“Still, I cannot believe I did not think of Bukubukuchagama’s will, though it should have been the most important thing to consider. As expected of our creator, our Overlord. I will never be able to equal your wise decisions, made by considering countless points of view.”

“No, don’t say that, Albedo. I’m certain you will display talents that will exceed mine someday.”

The fact was, she had already exceeded him by far. Ainz felt ashamed of himself as he thought about that, but Albedo simply nodded, her face full of conviction.

“Yes! I shall!”

“—Then, what other reasons are there?”

“Really now, Aura. Albedo, explain to the two of them. Make it easy enough to understand that even a child could get it. Yes, it must be easy to understand,”

After Ainz said this, he fell silent and and then looked out the window once more. However, all the nerves of his body were concentrated on listening, because he did not want to miss a single word Albedo said.

“Indeed. Actually, I wanted to bring this up with Ainz-sama afterwards. The fact is, a small problem has cropped up.”

“Ehhh? Did someone cause you trouble? Want us to go over there and wipe him out for you?”

“No, it’s not like that. The truth is, we’ve discovered that our resource stockpiles might not be sufficient for the future. So if we ordered everyone to change their clothes right now, we would only be able to take troublesome measures like exchanging old clothes and so on.”

Eh, really? Of course, Ainz could not say that. All he could do was desperately try to recall the contents of the file he had just seen.

Indeed, it contained something about resources, but the amount seemed quite adequate. However, if Albedo said so, then it must be true.

In other word, this is a pretty bad situation, no? Still, if that’s the case, can’t we just purchase more from the Kingdom or the Empire? A city like this should carry enough capital for that, right?

Albedo had an answer to Ainz’s justified doubts:

“This city was an excellent storehouse for resources, and it functioned as a trade city. However, since Ainz-sama has taken control, the traders from the other three countries rarely visit this place. Thus, we are in a situation where our remaining resources are ebbing away.”

“If we don’t have them, then let’s grab them from elsewhere. How about from the Empire or the Kingdom?”

“Onee-chan, we, we can’t do that. Ah, A-Ainz-sama said we were forbidden to use force on those three countries, right?”

Indeed. Though he did not know about the future, he had placed a blanket ban on the use of military force until he had fully assumed control of this city. Of course, if the other side attacked first, that was a different matter entirely.

“Then, what should we do?”

“Er, erm, we shouldn’t need to worry. A-after all, A-Ainz-sama will settle it.”

Are you going to dump all this on me now? Ainz wanted to refute Mare with that, but he forced himself not to. After Aura replied to Mare with, “I see!” he could not bring himself to betray the trust those two kids placed in him.

However, an ordinary employee like Ainz could not possibly think of a proper financial policy. Because of that, Ainz decided to play one of his two trump cards.

Ainz slowly turned, and confidently said:

“—Albedo. You’re taking care of this, aren’t you?”

In other words, he would dump it all on another talented person (Albedo) and be done with it.

“Yes. Recently, the seeds Demiurge has been sowing should be ready to be harvested.”

“Just so. The two of you have nothing to worry about.”

Their sparkly-eyed looks of respect and adoration made Ainz feel a twinge of guilt. At the same time, the fear of seeing the looks of disappointment in their eyes when they found out all this was fake took root in his heart.

Still, that Demiurge. I don’t know what seeds he planted, but he’s really amazing.

Ainz wanted to ask about the harvest, but he could not.

This was because Ainz Ooal Gown should have been a luminary who knew everything.

I know I should have studied economics, but I could only skim through those complicated books… like, they should have made the ones on Keynesian economics and so on easier to understand. Or could it be that I’ve become set in my ways because of my age?

Ainz was thoroughly versed in the game mechanics of YGGDRASIL. This was not an idle boast; he had learned over 700 spells and had memorized the details of each one, a feat which shocked his friends. Even those spells he had not learned could still become a weapon to read his opponents' strengths, once he knew of them. This was why Ainz had done his best to memorize all those spells. He was easily in the top five amongst his guildmates when it came to magical knowledge.

Still, while he could do that, he was completely clueless about academics.

Eh? Could it be that I can't remember more things because I don't have a brain?

Ainz knew that he had learned many things since coming to this world, so he also knew that was impossible. Still, he trembled a little at that frightening theory.

"And then, I have a matter which requires Ainz-sama's approval…"

"—What? Did you say approval?"

Ainz did not feel any suggestion Albedo made would require his approval. After all, she was a clever girl, and would surely make choices that were better than his own. However, if that was the case, the organization would not be able to function properly. After all, the people on top had to bear responsibility for their subordinates' actions. Because of that, it would seem that superiors had to grant seals of approval in this fashion.

"Someone must visit the Royal Capital to stir up those humans. Would you permit your servant to go?"

"What?!"

Ainz was taken completely by surprise, and exclaimed louder than normal.

Sending Albedo out while Demiurge was not around made Ainz feel very uneasy. Besides, his control over this city was not perfect.

More than anything else, the reason why this was so shocking was because this was the first time Albedo spoke of something like this.

"...If I send you out… I would be quite troubled…"

“My,” Albedo smiled in delight. “It will be fine, Ainz-sama. I shall immediately settle matters and return to your side.”

“Is that so… well, if it’s just for a while it should be fine. Who will be given control of Nazarick and this city?”

Aura and Mare looked quite surprised, so it was obviously not them. *Not me, I hope*, Ainz hoped.

“I plan to entrust them to Pandora’s Actor.”

Aura and Mare said something along the lines of “It’ll be fine if it’s him.”

“...Him, you say.”

“He is an excellent individual created by you, Ainz-sama. As they say, like father, like son — ah, I apologize. To think we who were merely created would dare claim to be the children of the Supreme Beings. I pray you will forgive my rudeness.”

Albedo’s sudden apology stunned Ainz — even the red points of light in his eyes faded.

“There’s no need to apologize. That is, well, my child… sorry. I do not dislike him, that, hm. foolish child… no, that’s not his fault either… Well, how shall I put it. He’s like a child. Umu.”

Before he knew it, everyone had gone quiet. Ainz knew that the conversation would dry up if this went on, so he steeled himself and asked:

“If we let Pandora’s Actor manage this, what about Momon, who he is portraying? Should I do it?”

“No, how could we have you do that sort of thing, Ainz-sama? I was planning to have Momon accept a request and be sent abroad for reconnaissance.”

Mm, Ainz nodded. Although he thought about relaxing by taking the guise of Momon, things were now vastly different from when he was playing the role of an adventurer.

There would be many troublesome things, or things which had to be carefully handled. That being the case, sending Momon out on a scouting mission might be the best choice.

“Ah, a-about that… if you send Mo-Momon-sama out, will the people in this city behave?”

“It will be fine. This single move by Ainz-sama has had a great impact here. Because we have not trivialized humans — although there was hardly any intention to do so — Momon has become deeply trusted. Thus, all we need to do is have Momon tell the local leaders to obey us before he leaves and all should be fine. Still, come to think of it, they have no idea that they are puppets dancing on strings, ruled by Ainz-sama… As I thought, only he could have anticipated this turn of events right after being transported here and made the appropriate preparations.”

“Mm — it’s kind of strange, how they trust Momon-sama, but not Ainz-sama.”

“Indeed. Still, this is an important part in completely controlling this city in the name of peace. All we need to do is gradually remove Momon and instil loyalty to Ainz-sama in his place. This might take several years, but it can’t be helped.”

“Good. Then, Albedo, hand it to Pandora’s Actor. After you have prepared yourself and handed over your tasks, go and reap the harvest. Is there anything else you need?”

“Understood. Then, I plan to conduct some negotiations when I go to see the humans’ king. Could you spare some of your valuable time to go over a draft with me?”

“Umu. Bring it to me later.”

Besides, all he would be doing was something simple like putting his seal on Albedo’s draft.

“In addition, though it shames me to ask, I would be delighted if you could give me several sets of clothing. I was simply thinking that it would be necessary to change clothes there.”

"Is that so. Then I shall give you several sets of my clothes. Come look for me later. Speaking of which, Demiurge — no, there's no need. It's fine. Then, let's continue… hm, since you've come all the way here, I'd like to hear from the two of you as well."

Part 2

After their business was concluded, the three of them left the room with the Elder Liches, leaving Ainz and Fifth. And, of course, the Eight Edge Assassins on the ceiling.

Frankly speaking, this was the end of Ainz's work for the day. The rest was all free time. While there were some matters which were best settled earlier on, once they were finished, he found himself quite free. As he mused on what to do with his time, Ainz suddenly thought of something and rose to his feet.

"I will be seeing Pandora's Actor next."

With that order, Ainz strode forth. Fifth followed in silence. Naturally, so did the Eight Edge Assassins.

Once he left his home, he found that the outdoors was still quite cool, as befitting the season. The wind had a hint of chill in it, but Ainz was completely immune to the cold. After glancing at Fifth to make sure she was all right, he continued walking.

This district contained three kinds of buildings: Ainz's own residence, all manner of government structures, as well as guest houses. Pandora's Actor — no, Momon lived in one of those guest houses.

Normally, he would have summoned Momon before him as befitting his status as a ruler, but what he did now was because he had changed his mind.

"—Hm? What's this?" Ainz muttered as he neared the guest house. He was looking at the stables which adjoined the guest house in question. The word "stables" implied that it would be used to quarter horses, but now the only one in there was Hamsuke. Or rather, that was how it should have been.

Somewhat confused, Ainz drew near to the stables, and heard a quiet *hyu~hyu~* of snoring. Sleep was a privilege of living creatures, so Hamsuke should be inside.

The sun was already quite high in the sky, but Hamsuke was still asleep.

Hamsuke could see in the dark like a cat, but according to Hamsuke, she was neither diurnal nor nocturnal. She ate her fill and then slept until she was hungry. That was her way of life.

When Ainz first heard of this, he wondered, "What part of this sounds like a Wise King of the Forest". He felt like a fool for expecting her to behave like an intelligent being.

"She hasn't noticed us even though we're so close. Did she lose her feral instincts? Really… what a degenerate fellow. No, perhaps it worked all night last night."

"That is not the case. Hamsuke-sama was here the whole of yesterday as well."

"...I see."

Ainz wanted to speak to Hamsuke despite Fifth's merciless words, but he could not think of anything to say.

Well, she was just a pet anyway. I shouldn't have expected anything from her. Doesn't matter if she allowed herself to fall to that level… still, I'm busy with all sorts of things, but she's here taking it easy. It really pisses me off… although I know I'm just taking my anger out on her.

He peeked his head into the stables, and the giant hamster was sleeping on the ground in an unguarded manner. All she needed now was a giant bubble from her nose and it would be the very picture of a sleepyhead.

However, there was something else which drew Ainz's attention, apart from the way Hamsuke was sleeping like a middle-aged uncle (although her body should not have allowed for it).

There was a Death Knight that had Hamsuke's tail wrapped around its waist. That undead creature must have been what drew Ainz's attention to this stable in the first place.

Since it was an undead creature which he had made, there was a bond between them and so he could judge its approximate location. However, there were too many undead in E-Rantel, so that particular sense had grown confused.

In all honesty, it was very difficult for him to finely discern the location of the undead he had made. Even so, Ainz did not recall stationing one in the stables, hence his confusion at picking up an undead reaction here.

"Wake up, Hamsuke."

"Muuu, yes...."

Her eyes blinked like those of a human being as her big face moved, and then she caught sight of Ainz.

"Ohhhh! I was wondering who it was, but as it turns out, it is milord!"

"It doesn't matter who I am. Normally you should be calling me Ainz-sama, right? After all, you are Momon's steed, not mine."

"Of course I am, milord!"

"Is that so… well, as long as you understand…"

That said, Hamsuke's reaction made Ainz think, *Do you really understand?*

In addition, magical beasts were not particularly resistant to mind control. Hence, Ainz lent an item to Hamsuke which made her impervious to mind control, but he was still uneasy that someone might try to manipulate her through means other than magic.

"Well, since you haven't made any mistakes to date, I shall trust you. Then, onto the main topic. What's with that Death Knight?"

“Ohhh! He is a friend who trains with this one, milord!”

It was then that Ainz remembered.

He had conducted an experiment in learning martial arts while Hamsuke was training to be a warrior. In other words, he used this Death Knight to see if it could continue gaining levels as a warrior.

He had equipped the Death Knight with artifacts that increased XP gain but that would greatly weaken it. However, in the end the Death Knight did not gain any levels. Ainz had anticipated that outcome, so he was not angry. Still, for some reason, Hamsuke had been going on and on about the Death Knight, so in the end, he took back the artifacts and left the Death Knight with her.

So that’s the one… Come to think of it, the spikes on its armor look rounded down… I didn’t loan it out to be a hug pillow, but because I wanted it to become a warrior, or perhaps master something… Well, it doesn’t matter. There’s enough Death Knights to go around. Giving it one won’t matter.

In fact, there were more than enough Death Knights, so much so that Ainz no longer made Death Knights when he created undead every day.

“Is that so. I understand. Still, no matter what, you used to be a wild magical beast. It’s quite problematic that you let someone get so close without noticing. We’re not as stealthy as Aura, are we? Shouldn’t you be taking this a bit more seriously?”

Hamsuke looked depressed, and her whiskers drooped down.

“This one sincerely apologizes. This one used to be the strongest creature in that forest. This one never needed to be on alert because this one was never ambushed before.”

“You should have had a childhood… period… or something, right? But before that, wasn’t there the Giant of the East and the Serpent of the West?”

“Who are they? These gentlemen… East? West? Of whom do you speak?”

A question mark appeared over Ainz’s head.

“...They were beings who laid claim to the forest, just like you.”

“Hoho~ I did not even know such people existed in that forest! As expected of you, milord! Your insight is indeed keen. This one knew little outside of this one’s territory.”

“You… you call yourself the Wise King of the Forest and you still…”

“In the past, a human warrior who trespassed in the territory of this one addressed this one in such a way. Speaking of which, this one spared that warrior and that warrior alone because this one thought the name sounded quite impressive. Ah, how nostalgic—”

Ainz felt that he had finally solved the mystery.

After that warrior returned alive, he must have greatly exaggerated the tales of his enemy, Hamsuke. It was probably some way of justifying his own survival when all his comrades had perished.

That too was not hard to understand. The fact was that Hamsuke was very strong. Of all the human warriors Ainz had met, perhaps only Clementine and Gazef could have beaten Hamsuke.

Ainz suddenly recalled Gazef.

“Ohh? Is something the matter, milord?”

“No… it’s nothing. Just… yes… it’s just that you don’t qualify as a Wise King of the Forest, just a Hamster of the Forest.”

“Hamsters, you say — indeed, you have spoken of those creatures before, milord! So is this one truly a hamster?”

“Umu. You are a Giant Hamster.”

“Ohhh! So this one was actually a Giant Hamster! Then, do you know where to find other members of this one’s species, milord?”

"That, I do not know."

After that curt reply, Hamsuke fell into despair once more. *Was I too harsh?* Ainz thought and tried to comfort her by saying:

"I have guaranteed all who serve Nazarick that they will be rewarded appropriately for their service. As long as you continue working for Nazarick, I shall someday find fellow members of your species for you."

"Ohhhh!"

Hamsuke's whiskers bounced as they stood up.

"Although this one was already loyal to milord, this one shall serve milord even more loyally from this day forth!"

"Umu umu. Then, Hamsuke, is Momon — no, is Pandora's Actor within the guest house?"

"Milord's double? This one is not too confident in that regard. After all, he often rides the coaches and wagons which the humans of this city prepare for him, and he does not always take this one with him."

"Ah, I seem to recall that he takes such transport to share information."

Kuku, Ainz chuckled evilly.

Everything had developed as he had anticipated. Under the guise of sharing information with him, people would say things to Momon which they wanted to keep secret from Ainz, or perhaps they might plot to drive a wedge between Momon and Ainz. However, the truth was, they were the ones who would be unknowingly poisoned by the thoughts of Pandora's Actor.

Ainz was a trustworthy king, a merciful being who thought of the people, and so on.

"I understand. However… you seem to be able to wear armor now. If you have nothing to do, how about putting it on and training in it?"

The prototype armor should be complete.

“This one understands, milord! Then, this one would also like to see those lizardmen-donos, if possible.”

“Very well. I shall grant your wish. I will speak to Cocytus afterwards and have him send someone here.”

“You have this one’s undying thanks, milord. Come, Death Knight-dono! Let us work hard together!”

Ainz paid no heed to the burning friendship between a beast and a corpse and moved on.

Behind Ainz was a voice which said something along the lines of “Really — how annoying!” but he could not think of what the Death Knight might have to say. Although Ainz was vaguely interested in what Hamsuke was up to, he soon cast the thought away.

Speaking of which, some time ago, I think I gave Hamsuke… it feels like I’ve forgotten something. Oh well, if I can’t think of it, it couldn’t have been that important, I guess.

Ainz’s head was filled with these thoughts, which he could not quite articulate. It felt a bit like waiting for a sneeze which would not come. He arrived before the door to the guest house, but he would not do anything like knock. Fifth, who had been following behind Ainz, immediately advanced before him.

“Open it.”

“Understood, Ainz-sama.”

Fifth looked terribly serious as she opened the door, but the corner of her mouth seemed somewhat relaxed. This must have come from the satisfaction she felt at being able to help Ainz in some way.

It seems I was right to observe Jircniv. I have truly become a proper ruler. Granted, that’s not exactly the right way to treat him, but I’ll continue studying him from now on. After all, it’s to help me learn how it is to be a king.

Ainz did not thank Fifth, but looked to the open door.

“—Eight Edge Assassins.”

“Yes! Ready for orders!”

The Eight Edge Assassins that were following behind Ainz swiftly formed up into a line.

“—Go.”

“Yes!”

Their jaws opened and closed, and then the lined-up Eight Edge Assassins responded with a voice that seemed more forceful than usual before entering the building. Only Pandora’s Actor was supposed to be in this guest house. On occasion, Narberal was here, but for the most part, she was in the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, carrying out Ainz’s orders.

He could have stationed a regular maid here, but it could be troublesome if people who came to visit Momon thought they were being observed. Thus, it had come to this. However, if Pandora’s Actor stayed here alone, there was the possibility that the people who had brainwashed Shalltear might infiltrate this place. Thus, Ainz felt it was better to set up some countermeasures.

...Still, in order for that to happen, someone would need to infiltrate all the way in here. Well, only fools don’t prepare enough. ...Mm — still, how long should I wait here? Or should I move forward? By common sense, I should wait here. After all, the Eight Edge Assassins will return to me. However, is a king really supposed to wait at the door?

After hesitating for a bit, Ainz thought, *ah well, forget it,* and entered the guest house.

He advanced, using the regal, proper bearing he had practiced dozens of times, in a way which he felt best fitted a ruler.

However, within less than 20 paces, one of the Eight Ege Assassins returned and genuflected before Ainz.

“Ainz-sama, we have summoned Pandora’s Actor-sama. He will present himself to you soon.”

“Is that so. Then I shall wait in the guest room.”

Ainz had been to this guest house before, so Ainz had a rough idea of its layout. After Fifth opened the door for him, Ainz moved without hesitation to the main seat in the guest room.

This violated much of the manners he had picked up as a salaryman and felt wrong to him. However, this was an easy task for Ainz, who had spent much time practicing to be a ruler.

Shortly after, a knocking came from the door. Ainz nodded to Fifth.

Having received permission, Fifth opened the door, and Pandora’s Actor entered the room. He was not using magic to appear as Momon, but was in his usual military uniform.

“Oh Supreme One, my creator Ainz-sama—”

“No need to greet me. Sit.”

“Yes!”

He clicked his heels together before marching in.

His movements were as smooth and crisp as that of a soldier’s, but to Ainz, they were entirely unnecessary. The best word to describe this was “overacting”.

And so, Pandora’s Actor advanced to the place beside Ainz and sat.

Don’t people usually sit opposite each other?
Everyone possessed an area around them called their personal space, but Ainz could not help but stare at Pandora’s Actor’s remorseless *blitzkrieg* upon him.

...Well, I guess it's all right. Still, he's really close...

Ainz closely inspected Pandora's Actor as he sat down. He no longer felt the same shock he had when he had first seen him in the Treasury. Perhaps the passage of time and meeting him several times to give orders had softened the impact on him.

"May I ask—"

"No, it's nothing, don't worry about it. All right, I have some things to ask you. First, I'd like to know about Momon's condition. I know what you've reported to Albedo… so, are there any problems?"

"It would seem that there is nothing spec—"

"Is that so. Good. Then, I'd like to ask you, as Pandora's Actor — are there any problems on your end?"

The mood in the air changed.

"In truth, Ainz-sama!"

Ainz leaned back, as though the tremendous presence of Pandora's Actor was crushing him.

"I, I have suffered greatly!"

Who's the one suffering here?!

However, Ainz did not have the time to shoot back with that before Pandora's Actor continued speaking.

"During this time, I have not once been able to touch magic items. I have been unable to maintain the various magic items created by the Supreme Beings. The sorting of data crystals has ground to a halt as well. Please! No matter what, Ainz-sama! I beseech you to grant me some time with those items!"

"...I, did I design you that way?"

“Of that there is no doubt! These feelings were bestowed upon me by yourself, Momonga-sama!”

“...Ahhhhh.”

Ainz desperately tried to recall the way he had designed Pandora’s Actor. He could recall giving him a backstory that stated he liked managing magic items and the like. Ainz’s original intent was to design him in such a way that he would not find it strange to be alone in the Treasury — indeed, one could consider being surrounded by the things he loved to be a heavenly job. So it would seem that Ainz’s personality settings were the source of the problem. However, for some reason, it seemed to have reached the level of a fetish.

“Did I not permit you to return to Nazarick every day?”

While half of Nazarick’s undead were made by Ainz, the other half were made by Pandora’s Actor. Granted, the undead made by Pandora’s Actor were weaker than those made by Ainz, to some extent. Still, that was within acceptable parameters, and there were adequate frozen corpses on the 5th Floor for that purpose.

In fact, there were so many of them that the two of them working together could not use them up.

“However, I have not received permission to return to the Treasury!”

What could he be feeling that made him omit his usual theatrics?

“I understand. Then, I shall inform Shalltear and have her give the Ring to you. In addition, I grant you permission to work on my comrades’ weaponry and equipment. Don’t damage them.”

“It shall—”

“Stop that. Speaking normally will be fine. Didn’t I tell you this before, hm, Pandora’s Actor?”

“Yes!”

“The relationship between us is one of creator and created. The fact is, I am very happy with the way you have worked hard to show me the being I intended to make. However, sometimes I wonder; should children not work to exceed their parents?”

“Ohhhh… Ainz-sama. To think you would refer to me as your child!”

“Umu, umu. You are, er, my son, or something like that. That, er, how shall I put this, should most likely, er, that should be the case. Therefore, there’s no need to use German or salute or be so dramatic in front of me. Since I made you, I want to see the parts of you that I did not make, as proof that you have grown.”

Ainz glanced behind at the sound of sniffling, and saw that Fifth was dabbing at the corners of her eyes with a handkerchief.

What?

Isn’t she crying too easily?

Just as Ainz was feeling confused, Pandora’s Actor bowed his head.

“I understand — Father!”

“...Oh.”

“I shall show you what you wish to see, Father!”

He was wrong. He had been too reckless. Although it was impossible, Ainz felt a headache assailing him.

“Pandora’s Actor. You must not tell anyone else of what has happened here. Understood? If people know that you’re receiving special treatment, it might result in friction with the others. Also — in fact, because of that, I will be placing you lower on my priorities. If the time comes when I have to choose between helping you or the Guardians, I will abandon you.”

“But of course! Please, sacrifice me as you see fit!”

As Ainz watched him thrust out his chest while speaking, a sense of guilt grew in Ainz's heart.

"I am sorry. And… Fifth. Do not speak of what has happened here."

After seeing Fifth nod in acknowledgement, Ainz nodded as well.

"Then, I will be on my way."

"Ah, about that, could you hold on a little? Since we meet rarely, there is a matter I would like to ask you, Father. May I know how you intend to rule this Sorcerous Kingdom?"

"What?"

"Many humans have their doubts about the path upon which you intend to take this country, Father. For instance, if you wish to adopt a policy of expansion, they fear that they will be sent onto the battlefield, and so on."

Ainz froze in place.

Where was he going to take Ainz Ooal Gown?

To begin with, Ainz was just a regular person, yet he had stated a nigh-unreachable goal like conquering the world. Ainz had stopped thinking about it. He felt that it would be better to hand this matter to intelligent people like Albedo or Demiurge.

That said, the matter of how to run this country was a question which he could not evade.

"Is, is something wrong, Father?"

"...I intend to let you know, but I'm still drafting it up in my mind. I shall discuss the matter with the various Guardians of Nazarick and then inform you."

"Yes!"

Ainz rose silently.

“Then that will be all, Pandora’s Actor.”

After hearing Pandora’s Actor bid him farewell, Ainz left the room.

Before he left through the main door, he sent a [Message] to Shalltear before he forgot, informing him of Pandora’s Actor’s request. If he put it off, he would probably forget it later on.

Once he reached the door, Ainz moved faster than Fifth and opened the door before she could do so for him.

Then, he looked to the sky.

It was a clear, blue sky.

“I’ll be flying,” Ainz curtly said. Although the people behind him began to panic, Ainz chose to pay them no heed.

Ainz floated into the sky thanks to the [Fly] spell, and then landed on the roof of the guest house.

Because E-Rantel was a city protected by three layers of walls, from this vantage, half of his field of vision was blocked by the city walls.

“I can’t see from here, huh? Looks like I’ll have to go for a walk.”

He might be able to think of something if he walked the streets. Staying here meant that there was no way he would be able to think of anything.

Just then, the forms of the Eight Edge Assassins — who had climbed the walls — appeared before Ainz as well.

“Ainz-sama, please wait! It’s dangerous to go alone!”

He could not simply laugh off the Eight Edge Assassins’ words.

Someone standing in the middle of a wide-open area with good visibility in all directions was practically asking to be sniped.

“That’s true. I’d make a good target if my opponent was Peroroncino-san.”

Peroroncino the archer — who was the most specialized in ranged combat within the guild Ainz Ooal Gown — would probably be able to hurt Ainz very badly. That man could easily attack from even two kilometers out. His favorite tactic was concealing himself and then sniping his opponent — albeit with a bow. That said, even if his opponent was Peroroncino, Ainz had no intention of allowing himself to be toyed with until he died.

Ainz was confident that he could use various means to defend, escape, or counterattack. He had honed his skills through PVPing, and he would definitely not die with no means of responding. However, if he had to be wary of attack methods which only existed in this world, the Eight Edge Assassins had a point.

Ainz could not die now. At the very least, before experimenting with resurrecting players, he had to assume he only had one life, and prepare a meatshield for himself.

His best and safest option for that job was Albedo, whose defensive strength was the highest among the Guardians. However, he would need people to protect her as well, which would necessitate a large deployment of forces. He did not want to do that unless it was for the purpose of baiting an enemy attack.

If that was the case, the best choice would be disposable and high-level vassals, but—

I don’t have any high-level vassal monsters. Even if I wanted to use mercenary monsters, I spent a lot of money summoning Albedo’s subordinates, so I don’t have the cash out of pocket to casually summon monsters.

He had decided to make a big show of spending to prove his generosity, and now he vaguely regretted doing so. All he could do was comfort himself by saying that he had to maintain his image as her boss.

Hang on, let's think this through step by step.

Ainz listed various possibilities in his mind.

Mercenary monsters. He had no money, so they were out.

The skill, [Undead Lieutenant]. It required XP, so he decided against it.

Using the summons from the Staff of Ainz Ooal Gown. The very fact that he had to carry the Guild Weapon with him meant that it was out of the question.

The skill, [Create Undead]. Even if he created upper-tier undead, they would only be level 70, which he would not even trust to escort the Guardians.

No, I still have a trump card in store.

He had enhanced his undead creation skills through the use of a dark ritual.

He could only create upper-tier undead four times a day. However, if he divided those up into two uses, he could make undead of roughly level 90.

Ainz stroked his chin, and wondered what sort of undead to make. The thief-type Eternal Deaths, or sensory-focused Eyeball types...

Granted, the Eternal Deaths were excellent undead to use, but they had a passive skill called [Aura of Death and Decay] which was constantly in effect. It was a potent skill which combined the effects of Ainz's [Despair Aura V (instant death)] and [Despair Aura I (fear)], making it a creature that could inflict instant death and stat penalties upon the enemy. In particular, the stat penalty was not a mind-affecting ability. This allowed the skill to bypass immunity to mind-affecting effects, which made it very hard to deal with.

That said, if this ability was used when friendly fire was enabled, it would swiftly paint a hellish picture of suffering and misery. Of course, he might be able to order them to suppress the ability, but bringing undead like that onto the city streets was complete insanity.

Several other scary monsters appeared in his mind, but he shot all those ideas down.

...How should I say this… they're very capable, but they all look ugly.

None of them were at all suitable as guards which a king would have with him when walking the streets.

Just as Ainz was puzzling over the matter, he noticed Fifth beneath him, trying desperately to climb the wall.

Without another word, Ainz jumped off, using [Fly] in mid-air to slow his descent, and he landed gracefully on the ground below.

Fifth — who was gripping a window frame and whose face was flushed red — hurriedly assumed her position behind Ainz.

"Fifth."

"Yes!"

"I will be going out to the city after this."

"Understood, I shall ready the carriage immediately!"

"No, there is no need for that. I intend to observe the conditions in the city. I rule these streets, so I plan to go on foot."

"Eh?! But that would only stain your precious feet! Please order us to clean the streets for you! And we must prepare the followers!"

Few roads on E-Rantel were cobbled, so after the rain, the rest became stretches of mud.

"There is no need for that. I have lived in this city before."

That said, after checking into the inn, he immediately returned to Nazarick to make undead.

"In addition, I intend to summon followers with magic, so there is no need to send over people from Nazarick."

"...If that is the will of the Supreme One."

Still, the question of what to summon remains. If I call up demons or undead, it will lead to bad rumors and vicious gossip. So I'll need to summon something pretty, to raise opinions of me. What fits the bill...

As he thought of that, Ainz found the answer.

"I will be summoning angels after this. Let's go."

"Yes."

Although Ainz's karma value was extremely negative, he would not have a problem summoning angels, whose karma values were highly positive. There were some classes which had the penalty of not being able to summon monsters whose karma values were too different from their own, but Ainz did not have such classes.

Incidentally, the monsters summoned by those classes got stronger the closer the monsters' karma values were to their masters.

In YGGDRASIL, any disadvantages would have matching advantages as well.

Ainz headed toward the courtyard.

As expected of a place used for putting horses through their paces, training hunting hounds and other such activities, the expanse of trimmed grass which made up the courtyard was vast indeed.

"Then, let's begin. This may take a while, so talk with me in the meantime."

"W-who, me?"

"Exactly. In other words, I want to know everything about Nazarick's 9th Floor — right. Tell me about your work. Is there anything about the rooms you are cleaning?"

Ainz did not wait for Fifth to reply. After changing out parts of his equipment, he cast his spell.

This spell was the super-tier spell [Pantheon], which was similar to the 10th tier spell [Armageddon - Good] and the super-tier spell [Nibelung I], and which was diametrically opposed to the super-tier spell [Pandemonium].

He listened to Fifth's words as he waited for the super-tier spell to take effect. If there was a sudden need to take urgent action, he would naturally use a cash item, but doing so at this time would have been terribly wasteful.

Chatting with the maids isn't bad, Ainz thought.

In addition, this was the first time he heard that Albedo's room was forbidden to the maids.

"—I see. Well, this was quite a meaningful conversation. Although I just thought about it, go back to my room and bring Nurunuru-kun over. It would be troublesome without him."

"Understood!"

Ainz watched Fifth's maid outfit sway wildly as she jogged off, while he remained in the courtyard.

While he waited, he recalled Fifth's words.

Apparently, Albedo had told the maids that she would handle the cleaning of her own room as part of her bridal training, so she did not wish for anyone to enter her room.

Ainz muttered "Good grief" to himself.

"Albedo, it's not that I don't understand your feelings, but the fact is that you're a busy person, so you should leave the cleaning to the maids. I can't really say this, but it seems I'm a better ruler than you are, in that sense."

Before long, Fifth returned, panting and presenting Nurunuru-kun. Ainz smiled, satisfied by his ability to command.

"Thanks."

Ainz accepted the Lip Bug from Fifth with a brief word of appreciation. Then, he applied the Lip Bug to the base of his bony throat.

"Ah, er, um."

For some reason, there was a change in Ainz's voice. Granted, that was the creature's special ability, but he still did not understand it. All he could do was accept it.

Ainz put his doubts aside and cast the super-tier spell. Six pillars of light appeared around him, and from them came six angels.

These angels had lions' heads, with one pair of wings stretched out and another pair folded around them, for a total of four wings. They each wore suits of shining armor and held shields with eye patterns in one hand and lances of fire in the other.

These angels were around level 80, and they were called Cherubim Gatekeepers.

Ainz did not know much about mythology, so he did not know why they were called gatekeepers, but he did know about their strengths as monsters.

The Cherubim Gatekeepers were quite well-suited to the task of being a tank, and their considerable sensory abilities also made them very good sentries.

"Protect me. Do not kill my enemies, but render the foe powerless while doing as little damage as possible."

"Understood, o summoner."

This order had not been given out of compassion. Although Ainz had no hesitation about killing his opponents, he had to consider that people might be scheming behind the scenes. In addition, he had to let Momon perform the executions, hence his instructions to capture the enemy alive.

"Then, let's go."

Once the Angels had taken a defensive formation around Ainz, he immediately strode forth.

Summon spells — including this super-tier spell — would terminate after a while. Thus, he had to avoid wasting time.

"Angels, Fifth will be walking with us. Defend her as you would me."

"Understood, o summoner."

"Ai-Ainz-sama, how could my body be compared to the precious form of the Supreme One?"

"...Fifth. You might be a maid, but you are still a creation of one of my friends. Thus, you are very valuable to me. Remember that well, because I find it troublesome to repeat myself. Then go tell all of your fellows."

"Thank, thank you very much!"

Incidentally, he did not say the same thing to the Eight Edge Assassins, as they were beings summoned from YGGDRASIL gold. He might have felt vaguely regretful about having to sacrifice them, but they had no value to him beyond that.

"Let's go."

With the six Angels, Fifth, and several Eight Edge Assassins — the rest were left as sentries — in tow, Ainz headed for the gate.

There loomed the form of a Crypt Lord, who commanded over twenty Death Knights.

It was dressed in tattered purple robes which were once magnificent, and it wore a crown that shone uncharacteristically bright. It was a level 70 undead creature from Nazarick.

Its commander-type skills could strengthen any Death Knights it controlled, but it could not do so since the Death Knights which were its subordinates were under Ainz's control. That said, Ainz had put it here because he acknowledged its excellent command abilities.

"I will be heading out after this, let Albedo know."

After walking past the Crypt Lord — who was bowing deeply — Ainz arrived at the streets.

He had no objective in mind.

Rather than taking a walk, it was more like he wanted to find the answer to Pandora's Actor's question. He would not be able to sort out what he could normally figure out if he was being bothered from all sides.

Ainz opened up his stride as he imagined the future which the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown would have under him.

Part 3

Ainz and the company advanced in a straight line along the main road.

It was hard to say the streets were filled with life. That much was obvious when he compared his memories from his time as Momon to the scenes before him now. The expressions of the pedestrians were grim, and they seemed to be moving a little quicker.

In contrast, the Death Knights walked proudly through the streets. They were probably patrolling in place of the usual city guard. Ainz had only given them simple orders: apprehend anyone engaging in violence, protect anyone who asked for help.

Ainz turned his gaze toward the city wall.

A portion of the mass-produced Death Knights were assigned to sentry duty on top of the walls. There were others like them who were watching the city gates or patrolling. However, the most bizarre way in which they were employed was in being ordered to build new villages with the denizens of the slum district.

The people who ended up being residents of the slums were typically the second or third sons of a family in villages: those who did not have their own farm to work. They dreamt of a better life in the city, but in the end, they could only scrape out a pauper's miserable existence amidst the ashes of their dreams. Thus, Ainz promised to grant them a plot of land, and sent them out there.

They were sent to the ruins of villages that had been burned down due to the Slaine Theocracy's plot. Since they had fallen due to external reasons, all one needed to do was to clear the rubble away, seek new villagers, and the village would naturally recover.

Because they had been attacked in the past, Ainz permitted the Death Knights and Soul Eaters to go with them as guards, and he also ordered them to help the villagers with their farm work.

Granted, neither of them were particularly adept at working the fields. However, they were far superior to ordinary human beings when it came to raw, physical strength. Essentially, they were heavy duty farm equipment which did not require fuel and which could function 24 hours a day. They were ideal for the task of breaking ground and heavy labor, and they would surely make great contributions in the coming harvests.

Ainz's aim was to build the villages back up within a year, and allow them to achieve basic self-sufficiency. They would then begin a regular harvest in the second year.

However, the aim of rebuilding the villages was merely to collect their produce as taxes and dump them into the Exchange Box, where they would become YGGDRASIL gold coins. Albedo and Demiurge had praised this idea to the heavens, so it should be quite workable.

He had lent the undead to them in order to avoid foolishly wasting time on colonizing the wilderness.

At the same time, since the undead were on loan, he would collect additional rental fees on them in addition to the agreed taxes. While he did not need to charge them rent, he came up with the idea after considering that he might end up loaning the undead to various other people in the future.

While that plan prioritized sending large numbers of the slums' residents — with their families in tow — out of the city, that alone was not the reason for the lack of people on the streets.

That would probably be because of Ainz. When pedestrians encountered him on the streets, they would stare with eyes wide before going back the way they came, or circling around him.

It was like walking in an abandoned wasteland.

Still, being feared was not bad. It was a dozen times better than being disrespected.

That said, it's hard to believe my city would be such a lifeless place...

He did not care what happened to anyone else as long as the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick and its NPCs were happy. However, what would his past friends think if they were around?

Would they be like Ainz, who had been affected by being undead, and end up being influenced by their nature as monsters? Would they end up treating humans as little more than fodder? Or would they continue holding on to their strong emotions from their time as humans?

What on earth do I want to build this country into...

Just as Pandora's Actor had said, Ainz needed to decide on how to run this country and the aim of ruling this city.

For example, by farming wheat and the like, and tossing them into the Treasury's Exchange Box he could obtain coins that could be used to to strengthen the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. The country would then become one whose sole aim was to produce currency.

For example, he could breed and slaughter humans, thus making the country produce XP which would be stored within Greed and Generosity.

For instance, he could hand over all production tasks and work to the undead, making it a country where the living did not need to work.

And for example—

From a land filled with love to one ringing with resentment, how would this country which bore the name of the guild turn out?

He could not hand this decision to his subordinates. This was his duty, his responsibility, as the ruler of Nazarick and the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown.

"—Fifth, what do you think of this city? Of this country?"

"My deepest apologies. May I know how you would like me to answer?"

He had been too abstract. Ainz decided to ask again:

“Do you feel this is a country where you can live in happiness? Tell me the whole truth and hold nothing back.”

“Yes. I am very happy in this country because you rule it, Ainz-sama.”

Ainz looked to the sky and sighed. Well, he should have expected an NPC to give him an answer like that.

“Just—”

“Oh, what’s the matter? Tell me anything that comes to your mind.”

“Understood. Why is it that despite you being here, Ainz-sama, that nobody comes out to pay homage to the ruler of this country, to your mighty form? And the way they hide in the buildings and peek out at you… it’s very upsetting!”

Fifth snorted. Indeed, many people were spying on Ainz and his entourage while hiding in the shops along the roads. In fact, some of them had gone weak at the knees when they saw the angels.

“Fifth, do you think humans are boring creatures?”

“Yes. It is as you say. They were not created by the Supreme Beings, thus they are pitiable lifeforms.”

More than half the beings in Nazarick thought that way. Even the level 1 maids were no exception.

“Fifth. All of you are still the most important to me.”

“Thank you very much!”

“However, I should show some measure of mercy to the people I rule. After all, they are citizens of the Sorcerer King.”

“It is as you say.”

“Then, why not turn this place into a utopia? A wonderful, dream-like world that is as sweet as soaking in honey. A world where they will wish to be ruled eternally.”

“I feel this is an excellent plan.”

“Since I intend to conquer the world, these subjects of mine will not just be humans. All the races of the world must kneel before me.”

“Naturally.”

Project Utopia.

This plan was being carried out on the 6th Floor, and was started with the intention of appealing to any players they encountered with the idea that Nazarick was a good guild which welcomed all races.

Using this place for the experiment sounds like a good idea, Ainz thought.

“I shall proclaim to the world: only those who serve the Sorcerer King shall have eternal prosperity.”

“There is no doubt that it is the truth.”

If he could do that, then if he ever found his former friends — his former guildmates — he could proudly show this city off to them.

It would seem the country Ainz wanted was one where he ruled various races who lived in harmony.

He would take the vision of Ainz Ooal Gown within the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick and reproduce it throughout the entire world.

Just like how his friends might be hiding in some corner of the world, he would make a world where different heteromorphs and races could smile and live.

The light in Ainz’s eyes grew brighter.

The Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown should be a country where all races could coexist. This was something only the Sorcerous Kingdom could do.

Even if the founder of a nation was a genius, there was no guarantee that his children would be similarly gifted. And the generation after that, his grandchildren, and his great-grandchildren after them — there was no guarantee they would be talented either. If the second generation was incompetent, they would be wiped out by society in the third generation. Ainz had heard this story quite often.

However, if they were ruled by an unaging, undying genius, this sort of thing would not happen. The ideal form of this was to have a dictatorship run by a handful of geniuses.

With people like Demiurge and Albedo in the Sorcerous Kingdom — no, it was because they were there that they could make it an eternal paradise. Like Ulbert had once said, a dictatorship run by an iron hand would be great, or something like that.

Ainz pondered the matter further.

Led by Demiurge and Albedo, the Guardians were proceeding with their objective of world domination. Ainz could not completely deny their point. After all, this could spread their name to his comrades.

However, would it not be better to spread that name through means other than ruling through force? By letting the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown be known as a utopia, they could make many people choose to bend the knee and submit to his rule for that sweet, honey-like promise.

It was like using sugar and a whip.

If Demiurge and Albedo were the whip, then Ainz would be the sugar.

What a great idea...

Ainz had decided.

Ainz was different from the NPCs that could only disdain those outside of Nazarick. This form of world conquest was something which only he, with his vestiges of humanity, could come up with. He would dominate through overwhelming charm.

Then, what should he do in order to carry out this plan?

As Ainz walked again, he thought desperately on the subject.

He would need methods unlike those of Demiurge and Albedo — methods which did not rely on strength.

He could not imagine running a country by himself. Because of that, Ainz would imagine himself as an employee of a small company.

It would be a small company, the kind which only had a single floor in a building, and the sole employee of that company was Ainz.

The product of this company would be "The Sorcerous Kingdom's Outstanding Rulership". He would be promoting the sales of this product.

First, he had to consider his target market. Only then could he deliver this product to the hands of those who needed it. However, he lacked information on his consumers. Why was that? It was simple — because he did not have enough publicity.

That said, it was not a matter of running to various cities and giving out pamphlets at the entrance. That would just be a waste of time. Ainz was the sole employee, so he had to consider other methods.

There was nothing like the mass media in this world. Although traders and other such professionals had their own intelligence networks, any publicity from them was hardly guaranteed to be accurate. Before Ainz had noticed, he was already at the entrance of the Adventurer's Guild.

Perhaps it was because he had come here often as Momon, but it seemed to have become a habit. That was probably a symptom of workaholism, right?

Ainz smiled bitterly, and opened the door.

The counter within the building loomed into view. There was a female receptionist seated there. On her left was a large set of double doors, and on the right was a noticeboard, which had requests on parchment attached to it. And the adventurers who should have been standing before it — were not there.

The Guild was empty. There was no comparing it to what he had seen during his time as Momon.

Ainz ignored the goggle-eyed receptionist who was staring at him, and walked to the noticeboard.

While he still could not understand their letters, he had memorized a few phrases, which included the month and the year.

At a glance, there were only old requests from a month ago. In other words, they were unimportant, repeating jobs.

“...Receptionist. There seem to be much fewer jobs now. Has nobody put in any new requests?”

“Hiii… yes, yes, that’s right. These are all we have, Your Majesty.”

So the number of adventurers had gone down because the number of requests had gone down as well.

The cause of that was Ainz.

Ainz had used his own military forces — the Death Knights — to patrol the streets and maintain the internal security of the Sorcerous Kingdom. In the end, it caused people to flee the threat of those monsters.

He considered that if they kept up their patrols, people like adventurers might completely cease to exist.

He would need to prepare requests for them in order to keep them around — no, there was no need to keep the adventurers around.

Anything adventurers could do, Death Knights could do better — though they might have difficulty with certain tasks, like picking herbs. But in that case, all he had to do was to rent the Death Knights out to herbalists as bodyguards.

Ainz still could not think of any uses for adventurers. And when one got down to it, the fact of the matter was that adventurers cost money to hire. E-Rantel and its lowered income did not have the luxury of such things.

In addition, they were hardly indispensable.

With that in mind, Ainz turned to the outside.

What a banal job...

He recalled the first time he and Narberal had come to the Adventurer's Guild in this city.

He had thought that adventurers were like what he had seen in YGGDRASIL, those who ventured into the unknown and trekked to various places around the world.

If they're just anti-monster mercenaries, then once the need for them is gone, they'll be out of a job. It's the same all over the world. To think that the image of adventurers as they were represented in YGGDRASIL was ultimately nothing more than a dream… A dream? Of exploring the unknown and travelling the world? Could it be...

Inspiration flashed through Ainz's mind.

If he changed adventurers from monster-hunting mercenaries to explorers of the unknown like in YGGDRASIL, that would mean they would carry the name of the Sorcerous Kingdom into unexplored lands.

Ainz did not just want to reach the human world, but all the other races as well. He could easily promote himself in the human world through traders' connections. However, since that was not enough, adventurers were the best choice for the job.

"Hmhm," Ainz nodded.

Although the receptionist looked at him in a puzzled way, he paid her no heed. Or rather, if he had minded her, that rare flash of inspiration would have vanished.

Thinking like the head of a small business, Ainz decided to contemplate the outcome of this plan.

However, the number of adventurers in the Sorcerous Kingdom is slowly dwindling. If this keeps up, the situation will continue to deteriorate. They might even vanish completely in the near future. What can I do to reverse this trend?

It was simple enough to increase their numbers. All he needed to do was reverse the current circumstances — in other words, the Sorcerous Kingdom would pay for monster elimination. However, that went against Ainz's goal of having adventurers be explorers of the unknown. While he could also place requests to have them advertise him, Ainz did not have the money for that.

There were literal mountains of gold in the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, but those were not Ainz's personal funds. While the NPCs would all agree that all the wealth in Nazarick belonged to Ainz, he did not want to use that money on a personal project.

Just as Ainz was deep in thought, the sound of a door opening came from the entrance.

As he turned around, he saw adventurers — who he seemed to have met before — standing in the doorway, frozen in place as they watched him.

Hm? That guy's name is… let me see… Yokmok? No, that's not right, but it's close.

It felt like he could reach it with his fingertips, but he could not quite get his hands on it. This frustration made Ainz dredge up the depths of his memories with all his will.

"Moknak...?!"

Just as he had found the answer, he blurted it out without thinking. Having been addressed by name, the adventurer froze in place.

Crap!

It was too late by the time he realized it. He could feel the eyes of the guild receptionist looking in this direction.

It was impossible that the new ruler of E-Rantel, the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown, would possibly know of a mere mithril-ranked adventurer. And if he did know the man, what did that imply? Ainz's brain spun into high gear as he cogitated, but before he came up with an answer, Moknak spoke:

"Did, did you hear that from Momon-dono? My name, that is…"

"Umu, yes. That is correct."

Ainz decided to catch that pass. A pair of dramatically opposite emotions appeared on Moknak's face, expectation and fear.

Having recovered from his prior perturbation, Ainz began a deeper analysis of the situation.

He remembered that this man was the leader of the mithril-ranked adventurer party "Rainbow". The first time he had seen him was during the Vampire Disturbance incident. They had spoken several times after that, but since they had not met recently, the man had slipped from his mind.

Much like other adventurers and soldiers, he seemed to worship Momon as a hero. So how would he feel about Momon becoming a minion of the Sorcerer King?

Why would Momon mention him to the Sorcerer King? Idle chatter? Or did Momon sell him out? His heart was probably awhirl with doubts and suspicions like that.

Ainz began looking for a way to turn this danger into an opportunity.

"When I asked him about capable adventurers around here, he told me about Moknak, the leader of 'Rainbow'."

Moknak, who had originally lowered his head, suddenly looked back up.

“Is — is that true?”

“Do you doubt my words?”

“No! Of course not…”

When discussing business with a client, the first thing one should do was praise one’s counterparts. Few people would react poorly to praise. Once they were in a better frame of mind, they could then talk business. This was both a basic skill for a salesman, and also an ultimate secret.

Now that he had shaken up the other side and fully seized the initiative, Ainz did not waste the chance to fire off another question.

“Tell me, why are you in E-Rantel?”

If he wanted to learn more about adventurers, the fastest way to achieve that was to directly question an adventurer.

Moknak was baffled by Ainz’s question, but before long, he seemed to have gathered up enough courage to answer him.

“Because of the undead, Your Majesty. This place is close to the Katze Plains, and we can kill monsters for money without ever running out of them.”

Although Ainz did not quite understand, it would seem that even as the sweat gushed off him, Moknak had a rebellious smile on his face that seemed to say, “There, I said it”.

Ainz had plans to bring the Katze Plains under his dominion in the near future. Of particular note were the rumors of a ship that cruised along the land, which piqued Ainz’s interest.

“Is that so.”

“Eh?’

"Hm?"

"Ah, no…"

What a frustrating man. Ainz refused the urge to sigh and impulsively asked:

"Is that all?"

"...No, there's more. Before Momon-dono came here, we were the only mithril-ranked adventurers among the senior adventurers, so it was easier for us to get well-paying jobs."

So it was money after all. Perhaps earmarking part of the budget for adventurer remunerations might be the best course of action.

"Also, I was born in this city, so I know many people here. And also, all sorts of magic items flow through here."

"Hoh, magic items, you say."

"Yes. After all, magic items have saved my life in the past, so as an adventurer, I would naturally want to base myself in a place with good access to them."

In YGGDRASIL, there were also stories of how a simple magic item averted a total party kill. That said, he had also seen many people who looked like adventurers in the Imperial Capital's markets. In other words, if he could set up a larger-scale magic item business than the Imperial Capital, it would be sure to draw adventurers over.

He would probably be able to achieve excellent results by making magic items with appropriate data crystals and then auctioning them off. However, that would fundamentally be raiding Nazarick's reserves, and there was no guarantee that Ainz and the others would not find the technologies developed with those items as a base pointed at their throats instead.

It should be fine if I use it as bait, right? No, I'd rather avoid using Nazarick's resources if I can avoid it. So how about items made using the magical technology of this world? That way, we could hand them off to other countries *without causing any problems… ah, this is hard. I'll leave that idea for another time.*

"Ah…"

Moknak's worried voice jolted Ainz's mind back from the depths of contemplation.

"Your Majesty, may I know why you are asking me these questions? If you will permit me to be frank..."

Moknak grit his teeth, and continued in a deeply pained voice.

"We are like dust when compared to even one of the undead that Your Majesty commands. With such powerful undead defending the area around this city, there is little point to the existence of adventurers within the Sorcerous Kingdom."

What should he say now? What turn of phrase could he use to leave him — and the receptionist looking over here, and the guild staff who had managed to cluster around them unseen — with a good impression of himself?

Or perhaps, he could take a dangerous risk and directly shut him up by saying "There is no need to explain that to you." That might be safer. However, if he did that, it might make them even more suspicious. There ought to be a better—

No, I have to believe in myself. I'm a man who has overcome many dangers in the past. I ought to be able to think of some way past this problem!

Ainz allowed his presence to radiate forth from him.

Come to think of it, you've already got such a clear picture of things in your mind. So why are you still in this city? Because you were born here? Do you have a girlfriend?

The answer to those questions would determine the direction in which the Sorcerer King would take this conversation.

“Before I answer you, I would like you to answer my first question. Why are you still in this city?”

“That, that’s because…”

Moknak began stumbling over his words. Then, despite hesitating a little, he continued:

“It’s because of Momon-dono. Momon-dono stayed in this city to be our shield. That being the case, how could I, a native of this city, do something as disgraceful as running away?”

In that instant, Ainz smiled.

Granted, while he had been Momon, he had understood this man to a certain extent. However, he had not expected him to bare his heart so readily.

“Is that so. Then, I shall answer your question.”

Ainz pretended to fall silent for a while, and then in a stern voice he announced:

“It is because of Momon. Since all of you might someday become people like Momon, I wanted to know what adventurers wanted, and what they sought.”

Moknak’s eyes went wide. The sounds of gulping could be heard from the nearby guild employees.

“Momon is strong, but more importantly, he has a noble spirit.”

It felt a little embarrassing to say that sort of thing about himself, but that was how Momon’s character had been planned, so it could not be helped.

“And then, I saw something like Momon’s radiance among you adventurers.”

Did my acting practice pay off, Ainz wondered as he uttered those words. A thunderbolt seemed to flash behind Moknak and the others.

"But, but Momon-dono is a supreme being, that only a chosen one could aspire to be. We couldn't possibly reach his—"

"So you're saying that Momon is blind to his own greatness, then?"

"What! Did, did Momon-dono say that too?!"

"Not directly."

While he did not think it was funny at all, he nevertheless strove to imply that he found it amusing. Ainz took on a king's smile — the result of much practice — and showed it to everyone.

"Even if you cannot do it, how about your children? Your grandchildren? Are you saying nobody around you could possibly give rise to someone like Momon? I am an immortal being, and the ruler of the Sorcerous Kingdom. It is only natural that I would want to take action to inspire genuine loyalty toward me from the next Momon. This is the meaning that I, as a ruler, have found for the existence of adventurers within the Sorcerous Kingdom. Well, there is another reason, but since it has not fully taken shape in my mind yet, I shall leave it at that for the moment."

The air around him was silent.

Hm? Didn't it work? Is this man not a zealous fan of Momon?

Just as unease was beginning to descend upon Ainz, Moknak bowed deeply to Ainz.

"Your Majesty, I am grateful for this meeting with you, and the opportunity to learn of your thoughts."

As Moknak raised his face, there was no trace of the unease, fear or doubt that had originally been there. In contrast, he had a cheerful, carefree smile in its place.

"...What an awesome man. To think you possessed such incredible charisma, surpassing even your own potent magic."

“I too am glad to have encountered such excellent adventurers. Someday, I would like to take you under my wing.”

Moknak’s face relaxed, feeling a little happier now.

“Still, Your Majesty. The Adventurer’s Guild remains unaffiliated with the government. Neither am I. Can you really take us on as subordinates?”

“Umu. I came for precisely that objective. Granted, this is just a rough draft and has not yet fully taken shape… Receptionist, tell the guildmaster that the Sorcerer King would like to speak with him.”

“Y-yes!”

The receptionist — who had been dumbly listening to their conversation — ran out of the room in a hurry.

“Then, Your Majesty, we bid you farewell.”

This was completely unlike how they had acted when they had first showed up. Moknak delivered a bow full of respect before he turned and left.

Now then… what should I do next.

The main thrust of Ainz’s incomplete plan was to use adventurers to extol the virtues of the Sorcerous Kingdom. There were three main points to that plan:

The first was the expansion of the Adventurer’s Guild. There was no point in an organization that only had 10 members or so.

The second was to nurture them. Weaklings could not go far, and if the gospel of being ruled by the Sorcerous Kingdom spread too slowly, it would not reap him many benefits.

The third was to make them want to genuinely help him. It was not that he could not use Momon, but if Ainzach wanted to help him out of his own free will, it would make things much easier in the future.

I need to solve these three problems before negotiating with Ainzach. Still… it's really hard to negotiate without any information at all. Ah~ my stomach aches.

All he could do now was to pray that the Guildmaster was not in. Unfortunately, the first thing which the receptionist said when she returned was, "This way, please."

Ainz looked up to the ceiling, and then followed behind the receptionist.

Part 4

He had walked through this corridor quite a few times as Momon, and he passed by the guildmaster's room — though he did not enter, but was instead taken to the room beside it. That room was used for entertaining guests.

A powerfully built man came out to meet him — the guildmaster Pluton Ainzach.

Ainz had met him as Momon several times before — he had dragged Momon with him to adult establishments in the past. However, this was the first time he had encountered the man as the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown, so he had to be deeply aware of his words and actions.

"Oh, it is Your Majesty, the Sorcerer King. As a citizen of this country, nothing could delight me more than to receive you within my humble abode. Please, come in, and though this is a dirty place, I bid you take a seat if it pleases you."

Ainz sat down at the place where Ainzach had indicated.

Fifth stood behind Ainz, while three of the angels followed Ainz inside. The rest remained outside the room, awaiting orders.

"By right, I should have been the one to visit you, but I am deeply grateful that you came all this way to see me."

Ainzach genuflected, and bowed his head deeply.

Ainz smiled bitterly as he saw Ainzach putting on that act.

It was completely different from how he had been when speaking to Momon. His kind voice was tinged with respect, but that was just a front. Ainz could not help but smile after realising that all this was just professional technique at work. Of course, his own expression had not changed at all.

Ainz turned his eyes toward the other door in the room, the one which was not the entrance.

That door led to the guildmaster's room. He would probably be talking in there if he was Momon. The fact that the guildmaster had received him here made Ainz aware of the distance between the two.

"Is something the matter, Your Majesty?"

Ainzach had raised his head to peek at Ainz, who seemed to have ignored him in favor of looking at the room to the side. Ainz could not help but snort at his foolishness.

Ainzach's face froze. Perhaps he thought that laughter was directed at him.

Ainz felt disgusted by his rudeness, but the Sorcerer King could not apologise. Instead, he decided to push ahead with the conversation in an attempt to gloss it over.

Still, what sort of attitude should he take toward the guildmaster?

Ainz was still feeling out the proper way to be a king, and did not have any knowledge in that field. The only thing guiding him was a vague feeling of "this should be right". With that, he decided to try something.

"I think you should have heard about it by now, Ainzach, but I have a proposal for you."

"—Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I am unsure of what you speak. If it is possible, could you start from the beginning?"

From his previous interactions with the man, Ainz knew that Ainzach was a capable man who was also capable of lying through his teeth. There was a high chance that he already had a firm grasp on the situation. That was probably why he had not been alarmed by the angels.

That being the case, there was no need to beat around the bush. Ainz decided to speak directly.

“I intend to incorporate this Adventurer’s Guild into the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“...Is that so. I do not think anybody will object to that.”

“Hoh. I have heard that the Adventurer’s Guild has always held itself to neutrality. Are you truly fine with this?”

“All shall proceed as you desire, Your Majesty. This nation is governed by the laws which you have set down. If Your Majesty wishes to subordinate the Adventurer’s Guild to his will, nobody can gainsay that decision.”

Ainz snorted again. That reaction seemed to get a rise out of Ainzach. Ainz sensed that he had gotten to the guildmaster, from the deep look in his eyes.

“Indeed, it shall proceed as I desire. However, do you truly intend to go along with it? Or perhaps you intend to warn off the adventurers and send them to the Empire and the Kingdom before turning over an empty shell of a guild to me.”

Ainzach looked intently at Ainz, and then he rounded his shoulders, as though to say, “So that’s as far as I go, huh.”

“As expected of Your Majesty. To think you would not only claim and rule this city, but even see through my innermost thoughts… did you read my mind with magic?”

“No, I did not use magic. It was nothing more than experience.”

“Because you have lived a long time, I take it. My my, what a fearsome lord you are. Then, what is to become of me?”

“Nothing will happen to you.”

“...I will not thank you for that, you know?”

“I do not need your thanks. More than that, I want your opinions. I have heard that adventurers exist to defend the people. Thus, they do not wish to be used in wars between humans and have maintained a degree of independence from any nation. Is this true?”

“It is as you say, Your Majesty. In truth, when Your Majesty laid claim to this town, we had no intention of offering any resistance.”

“And yet the man called Momon stood before me…?”

Ainzach grunted, “Oh.” Well, there was no point giving himself a hard time. Ainz decided to continue speaking, and of course, he had to help cover for Momon.

“Ah, I won’t pursue that matter. After all, we are working together, in a sense. Indeed, that cooperation is one of the reasons I can peacefully rule this place.”

Ainzach seemed to be on the verge of saying something, but Ainz ignored him and pressed on.

This was the real meat of the issue.

He had to bring Ainzach over to his side, and make him want to aid the Sorcerous Kingdom out of his own volition.

After recalling the various gripes and complaints he had heard during his time as Momon, Ainz said:

“...Then, I have a question after hearing your words. You were quite certain that ‘Adventurers exist to defend the people’. However, who exactly are these ‘people’?”

“May I know what you mean by that?”

There was a baffled look on Ainzach’s face.

“In other words, does the word ‘people’ encompass all humanoids, or just human beings? Are Elves, Half-Elves and other species that live in harmony with humanity covered by that word?”

“Well, about that, yes, they are included.”

“How strange, then. I seem to recall that Elves are slaves in the Empire, are they not? That being the case, can you really say that you are protecting them? Are they not slaves because they ran afoul of the Empire’s laws?”

Ainzach lowered his head. Then, he looked up to face Ainz again.

“...I am but the master of the Kingdom’s Adventurer’s Guild. Thus, I do not know what the Empire’s Guild has in mind.”

“So you’re just trying to weasel out of it with wordplay, then…”

AInzach’s eyes went wide, and there was clear anger there.

“Your Majesty, such mockery—”

“Mockery? Is this not the truth? ...I shall ask you again. Are you not trying to get yourself off the hook by being ambiguous?”

Ainzach lowered his eyes.

“...It is as you say.”

“You say that you will defend Elves and Half-Elves, but you have not done that at all. Why is that?”

Ainzach gave his explanation, beginning from the position that he was unclear about the intentions of the Adventurer’s Guild in the Empire.

“Though we are an Adventurer’s Guild, we cannot fully escape the bonds of countries. While the Adventurer’s Guild proudly declares itself to be above their rule, we remain obedient to the laws of the nations. We are an armed organization. It would be very dangerous if a group with our strength was to turn that power against the nation. I believe the Empire's Guild thinks along the same lines."

"That is what I meant. Since you are bound by a country's laws, then there should be no problem with being incorporated into that country. That being the case, why do you dislike that?"

"Both the Empire and the Kingdom covet our strength. After all, only adventurers like ourselves can fight on an even footing with powerful monsters. Because of that, nobody has made any difficult requests of us until now. However, that point is moot where Your Majesty is concerned. If we are made subordinate to you, there is a chance that our strength may be directed against the people."

"And so, you seek to resist assimilation into the country because you fear being made to use force against the common man, am I correct?"

"It is as Your Majesty says. We do not wish to be made to suppress people or to fight in wars. It would make us accessories to many deaths."

Ainz could not help but laugh at this. *Well, I knew that already.* But of course, he could not actually say that.

"Then sit. I shall now explain what I intend for you in the future."

Ainz had to tell him to sit again before Ainzach finally complied, taking a seat out of fear. Then, Ainz began his explanation.

"I am considering the possibility of having adventurers take on other, more meaningful types of work. I want adventurers to discover the unknown and explore this world."

Ainz felt Ainzach looking directly at him for the first time.

"For instance, there is a patch of wilderness to the south, between the Theocracy and the Holy Kingdom. But do you know the details of the terrain and what manner of monsters live there?"

“No, because there are many demihuman settlements there. The Adventurer’s Guild of the Kingdom has sent people there, but none have returned in one piece. Therefore, we know next to nothing about it.”

“Then, there is a mountain range to the southwest which serves as a natural barrier between yourselves and the Theocracy. What do you know of that place?”

“No, we do not have any detailed information about that region.”

“Are you not ashamed of that ignorance? No, perhaps it may seem unavoidable from the point of view of an adventurer. After all, you are an organization that protects the people, so there is no need to know about places which do not contain any people. Although, there is a chance that lifesaving herbs might grow in such regions.”

Ainzach’s mouth tightened into a straight line at that provocation.

“Once I take the Adventurer’s Guild under my banner, I plan to fill in all the blank spaces on the map.”

“...Would it not be better to hand that task to the people close to Your Majesty?”

“Don’t be foolish. I heard that you used to be an adventurer, Ainzach, so let me ask you again: When you think about the word ‘adventurer’, really ponder it, do you think you exist merely to fight monsters? Before I learned more about adventurers, I thought that they were beings who turned the unknown into the known.”

Ainzach bit his lip so hard that it seemed as though he was trying to draw blood.

“—We must protect the people.”

“There is no need for that. In this Sorcerous Kingdom, I will protect the people as their ruler. Given the sharp drop in requests, you should be able to understand the truth of my words, am I wrong?”

Ainzach answered in the affirmative, in a pained voice that sounded more like a groan.

“Then what will you do next? Will you move to the Kingdom or the Empire to protect the people? That sounds a lot like what a specialized monster-hunting mercenary would do.”

Ainz paused here. The next step would be persuasion. He had to devote the full capacity of his mind to what he said next.

“Earlier, you said ‘my subordinates should do it’. From a certain point of view, that would be a good solution. It is true that my subordinates excel at slaying the enemy. However, many of them raise serious doubts in my mind about whether or not they can build good relationships with the beings they meet in this unknown world. It is a great mark of shame for me. Therefore, I wish to leave this task to you adventurers.”

While he was quite interested in the silent Ainzach’s reaction, his presentation was not yet finished.

“Well, since I plan to have them do such a dangerous job, I will naturally give them my full support. Do you not think it is necessary for me to assimilate the Adventurer’s Guild for that?”

“...All you have to do is hire us.”

“I see. So you are quite confident in your strength. I do not dislike that courage.”

“What, what do you mean, Your Majesty?”

“Discovering the unknown includes the possibility of making unfortunate encounters with other civilizations. If that happened, do you not think the Sorcerous Kingdom would disavow you? In addition, the Adventurer’s Guild would then be solely responsible for dealing with any problems which arose, am I wrong? Since you claim to be an independent organization, do you not think that is to be expected? After all, any contracts I make with you will not incur any loss to the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

Ainzach fell silent.

“That is what it means to act independently, free from any nation’s control, is that not the case? And if a situation escalates to an international level, you would thus have to deal with it yourself… is what I am saying so laughable?”

“Certainly not, Your Majesty,” Ainzach nodded deeply, to show that he understood. “Every word you have spoken is correct.”

“Just so. But if that happens, valuable adventurers — professionals who possess special skills — will end up being depleted. As it takes human beings a long time to mature, the death of any talented individual will be a great loss. Because of that, I wanted to acquire the Adventurer’s Group. And then, they would receive my full support as the price for having to carry out my orders.”

“That is a very attractive proposal… However, I have a doubt I wish to clarify. Once we have understood the unknown, does that mean we will then become invasion forces for the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“That is a very complicated question. I cannot rule out that possibility entirely. After all, if we learn that an enemy which exists in unknown lands plans to launch an invasion, it is quite reasonable to use that information to take the initiative and strike the first blow instead. Said enemies might include demihumans like Ogres or Orcs who live in the wilderness. Or perhaps, it might be necessary to launch an invasion to show them the difference between their strength and ours. If there was a ferocious monster beside you which was sharpening its fangs, would you not want to strike first instead?”

“I see, it is as you say, But—”

“...Hm.”

“Is something the matter, Your Majesty?”

“It’s nothing, forgive me for interrupting you. What were you about to say just now?”

“...Understood. However, what troubles me is whether or not it is right to subdue by force those races who are living in peace.”

“What races are you thinking of? Elves, perhaps?”

“Well, perhaps.”

“...The details of this sort of thing are top secret as they are linked to national policy, so I cannot discuss this openly. If invasion and conquest would be advantageous to the Sorcerous Kingdom, we might end up doing so, or if they would only beget disadvantages, we would avoid such acts. This is quite common among countries, am I correct? However, if it comes to the simple matter of invasions, I can plainly state that I have adequate military forces at my disposal. I do not expect adventurers to collect information on enemy nations, nor do I need them to scout routes for me. As I said earlier, I simply desire them to explore the unknown and discover all sorts of things. I give you my word on this.”

However, right after saying that, Ainz asked Ainzach:

“Still, it does seem you treat races differently depending on how attractive they are. Why did you not say that line about ‘whether or not it is right to subdue by force those races who are living in peace’ when the topic of invading Orcs and Ogres came up?”

“That, that’s because they’re demihumans—!”

“Hahahaha. I see, I see. So that is what you think. I understand, I understand. So, what is your answer?”

Ainzach seemed to want to say something, but he immediately shook his head. That was probably to change his mind.

“Must I answer that question immediately, Your Majesty?”

“Certainly, I would like you to answer right away. However, this matter is of weighty importance, and you must prepare for it by discussing it with others. The fact it takes time cannot be helped. However, I would like to know what you think, Ainzach.”

Ainz leaned forward, so he could look right into Ainzach’s eyes from close up.

“I am very angry. But more than that, I am saddened by the fact that you are nothing more than simple monster exterminators. How dare people like you call yourselves adventurers? Ainzach, what do you think? Are you willing to adventure under my rule? It is my hope for you all that—”

Here, Ainz paused for a beat. Then, he let the strength flow into his eyes and his voice.

“—That you will all be able to become ‘Adventurers’.”

Tension filled the room. As though observing an opponent who had been slain by his finishing move, Ainz held his breath — although he could not breathe to begin with — and awaited Ainzach’s response.

“...I feel this is a very attractive proposition.”

The lights within Ainz’s empty orbits dimmed. It seemed like he would find some reason to refuse.

“—Therefore, I intend to ask the others if they can accept this proposal. It is true that using adventurers like us for such a purpose is like a dream come true. Becoming agents of the Sorcerous Kingdom is something we can come to terms with at some point. If I might be allowed to speak as a former adventurer… I would be happy to help.”

—Eh, does that mean it worked?

“Really now…”

Ainz leaned back against the sofa.

The joy of his speech’s success spread steadily through him. It was like the feeling of leaving a client after clinching a deal, then rushing to a coffeeshop to call up one’s own firm and shouting “I did it!” over the phone.

He had not expected his experience as an adventurer to end up being used here. No, it was because of that experience that Ainz could come up with that proposal.

And just then, Ainz thought of something that was so important it had to be addressed right away. It concerned the future of the Sorcerous Kingdom which he envisioned.

“Ah, that’s right. One more thing.”

Ainz raised a bony finger.

“When you said you wanted to protect the people, you defined it as encompassing all humanoids. Thus, the purpose of adventurers is to protect all people within that definition.”

“Yes. That is true, Your Majesty.”

“And then, when the topic turned to invasion, you indicated that it would be alright as long as they were demihumans. Is that correct?”

Ainzach nodded, his expression saying, “so what?”

“The Sorcerous Kingdom will accept all races as its subjects. That is to say, not just humanoids, but demihumans and heteromorphs. Therefore, if the philosophy of adventurers is to protect the people, then you must defend demihumans and heteromorphs as well.”

Ainzach’s eyes went wide.

“What are you saying?!”

“...What’s wrong? I do not understand why you are so agitated. In my country, there is no difference between humans, demihumans or heteromorphic beings. If they acknowledge me as their king, then they shall be my subjects.”

“This, this is too ridiculous. This is impossible, Your Majesty!”

“Is that so? I have heard of a country to the north of the Kingdom called the Republic. Are there not many races which coexist there?”

“Indeed, I have heard of such a country… no! Do you intend to have us coexist with those races which see humans as little more than food?”

“I see, it is as you say. The Sorcerous Kingdom will not permit its subjects to eat fellow subjects. I will make that a matter of the law. That should be enough, right? However, I will not stop them if they seek to prey upon those who are not my subjects. After all, I am not the sort who will interfere with my people’s dining habits… no, seeing the members of one’s race being butchered and sold for meat is damaging to the mind… perhaps that matter will require further debate.”

According to Lupusregina, the villagers of Carne lived in harmony with Goblins and Ogres. Thus, there was no reason for that to be impossible for this city. That said, the sheer number of people involved would complicate the matter.

“What, what exactly do you intend, intend to do?”

“You certainly do ask a lot of surprising questions. Why not ask why all of you, as fellow living creatures, cannot be united? As one of the undead, I find that point quite difficult to understand. To me, there is no difference between humans and Goblins. All races will be equal under my rule. Of course, I shall be above you as your absolute ruler, as will the subordinates under me.”

Ainzach’s breathing seemed to shift through a variety of speeds, before calming down in the end.

“So you will take Goblins under your banner — make them into your citizens?”

“Did you not hear what I said before? I said I would take Orcs and Ogres as my subjects as well, no?”

“Forgive, forgive me. I did hear that, but I believed that they would be your slaves.”

“That answer certainly suits a race which would take Elves as slaves. Let me repeat myself — all citizens under my rule will be equal.”

As he glanced at the way Ainzach was panting, Ainz considered if the man had picked up on his intentions.

An extreme interpretation of those words would be that every subject of the Sorcerous Kingdom was a slave of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick and its members. Of course, he would not say that. Nor was there any need to say that. It would be best if Ainzach did not pick up on that at all.

“There are many Goblins under my protection. In a few days, a group of Goblins will visit E-Rantel. Do try mixing with them. The preconceptions you have of Goblins will surely be shattered. In addition, Lizardmen do not eat much meat, their primary diet being fish. Dryads and Treants love clean water and sunlight, and they only attack humans in self-defense.”

“Have you already taken that many vassals under your banner?”

“There is no doubt about that. There are quite a number of demihumans and heteromorphs which have become my subjects. Oh, it seems we’ve drifted quite far off-topic. Then, Ainzach, I take it you personally approve of the Adventurer’s Guild becoming a part of the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“—As long as Your Majesty is true to his word.”

“You do worry a lot, do you not? I am not lying. Adventurers should seek to explore the unknown.”

If possible, he hoped to put all sorts of races together into parties and send them out.

“Then, I will leave the task of explaining the matter to the other adventurers in your hands. If any adventurers do not approve of becoming public servants, then I will have no qualms about letting them leave.”

“Will that really be alright?”

“Forced cooperation will not be effective. That said, one can imagine that large changes to the organization’s structure and sudden deviations from current practices will cause a lot of problems. Therefore, the *status quo* will be maintained, to some extent. The most obvious change will only be the establishment of an investigative office for the guild and the guildmaster."

All that was left was the most important part; the inducements which would make more adventurers want to join the Adventurer's Guild of the Sorcerous Kingdom.

"The support which the Sorcerous Kingdom offers will primarily include the establishment of a training facility. It would be a terrible loss to blaze a trail into distant lands, only to be slain by unknown monsters. Therefore, a more practical training method than the current model — that of live combat against monsters — will be required. Considering that adventurers need to get used to team combat, it might be a good idea to build a labyrinth for them to delve into."

And the part of the monsters would be filled by Nazarick's POP undead.

"I feel that this is a very good idea. Only, it would surely be a sizeable undertaking."

Since the staff would be composed of the undead, who did not require salaries, the operating costs would not be too high. However, there was no need to be completely open with the information. One ought to sell favors without hesitation when the need arose.

"Indeed, this would require a sizable initial investment. However, that is within the allowable limit for necessary expenses. After all, adventurers are a valuable human resource for the Sorcerous Kingdom."

"I am deeply grateful, Your Majesty."

"No need to stand on ceremony. Then, how about it? Do you not think the adventurers would be attracted by this?"

"Indeed, the labyrinth would be quite attractive to low-level adventurers… but what if the adventurers decide to transfer to the Kingdom or the Empire's guilds after completing their training?"

“Of course that will not be allowed. This is a state organ; misuse of it could well be considered treason.”

“I see… it seems I will need to carefully explain that part.”

“Then, how shall we attract higher-ranked adventurers?”

“It would seem remuneration is the best answer.”

“Well, it is not as though one can eat dreams.”

“It is as you say. In addition, without better weapons, armor and other magical items, it will be impossible to defeat powerful monsters. These items are typically very expensive.”

“...Hm. There is that.”

Mass-production could lower the price of such equipment. However, powerful adventurers were very rare. Thus their gear was custom-made, which naturally drove their prices up. In addition, people who could make such items were very rare, which only contributed to the price. He had to think of a way to deal with the problems which followed that as well.

“In addition, I would like to let more adventurers — those of the Kingdom and the Empire — know of this place. Do you have any ideas?”

“The Adventurer’s Guild which Your Majesty intends to establish is an unimaginably desirable thing, compared to the Adventurer’s Guilds of the Kingdom and the Empire. Once the news gets out, the Guilds of the various nations might try some means to interfere with it in order to keep their adventurers from being drawn away. After all, each country counts adventurers as their trump cards, and they would not be pleased to see their adventurers go to another country.”

“Indeed, that is correct. What do you think would be a good solution to this?”

“It is difficult for me to answer promptly. Might I be allowed a bit of time?”

“Come to think of it, that is true. I too must plot a course for the future..”

The fact was, this lofty goal was a bit too much for Ainz to handle by himself. He had to calm down, think about things, and discuss it with someone else.

Ainz rose to his feet.

“Then, we’ll leave—” Ainz quickly shut his mouth before he could say something rude. That was not how a king should speak. “We will leave matters at this for today. I shall see you again.”

Ainzach hurriedly rose to his feet and lowered his head.

“Understood, Your Majesty.”

Without looking back, Ainz left the room through the door Fifth had opened.

Although he wanted to sigh, he was still in the guild. Doing so right now would be premature.

Ainz led the Cherubim out of the Adventurer’s Guild. After walking a little further on, he allowed himself to sigh quietly.

Ahhhh~ I’m beat...

While Ainz Ooal Gown could not possibly say that he was tired, Suzuki Satoru was practically crying for a rest for his overheated brain.

Before I talk to Albedo about absorbing the Adventurer’s Guild, I should take a brief rest. I also need to find some way to convince Albedo about the merits of this plan… there’s so many things to do now...

Ainz strode forth in silence. He did not use teleportation magic, instead he prayed that he would stumble on a good idea before he reached home.

♦ ♦ ♦

The door to the adjacent room — Ainzach's office — opened, and a new guest entered.

The man with an excessively skinny body — to the point where some might even consider him anorexic — was Ainzach's old friend, the head of E-Rantel's Magician's Guild, Theo Rakesheer.

"Pluton, that was quite a surprise. I didn't expect the Sorcerer King to come calling in the middle of our discussions. Did he notice something?"

"I'm not so sure about that."

This morning, Ainzach had gone through the daily routine of meeting Rakesheer early on to exchange information.

Ever since the city had fallen under the sway of the Sorcerer King, they only met in the morning. The reason for that was because they believed that most undead did not like the sun. Still, after seeing the undead army patrol the streets, they knew that it was little more than a way to put their minds at ease.

Their meetings were essentially undertaken for the purpose of swapping news, with no consideration to the future movements of the Adventurer's Guild and the Magician's Guild. Or rather, ever since the founding of the Sorcerous Kingdom, everyone who could flee had already left for the Empire and the Kingdom. The Magician's Guild had also transferred all their magic items out of the city, with only a few members staying behind. In other words, the Magician's Guild of this city was effectively disbanded.

However, there was still much that needed to be discussed in the field of information analysis.

Although adventurers were not particularly bound to countries, could they still carry on as they had before, from within the Sorcerous Kingdom? Would the Sorcerous Kingdom send harriers after the former citizens of this land who were busy fleeing it? If they managed to successfully cross the border, would the Sorcerous Kingdom demand the extradition of the refugees at a national level? What about magic casters?

How could they handle this situation without sacrificing Momon, who was now a resident here? In addition, how should the Adventurer's Guild treat Momon?

The temples remained silent, sensing that the Sorcerer King was keeping a distance from them too. However, would this carry on in the future? Would they lead a resistance movement against him?

Each of these questions was a challenging one, which taxed both their brains to the limit with nothing to show for their effort. However, it would be troublesome if they did nothing and simply let things unfold. The temples were particularly problematic in that respect.

Could the temples really accept their mortal enemy, one of the undead, as their king? They held their peace for now, but that in turn frightened the people even more.

In addition, there were the religious factions from the surrounding countries. If things went poorly, they might decide to unilaterally declare a holy war, with the temples within the Sorcerous Kingdom serving as a fifth column. That situation had a chance of coming to pass.

The reason why there was nobody here to represent the temples was because their stance on the matter was unclear. While it was easy enough to call them over, it would be bad if they ended up being drawn into something else instead.

That said, neither of them thought the temples would actually be able to defeat the Sorcerer King. What made them uneasy was the massacre that would surely unfold after they tried. Even worse, they feared that this would result in Momon, the Sword of the Sorcerer King, slaughtering them all. In addition, how would they heal the wounds in the hearts of the country's people after something like that happened?

Just as their heads were aching from this chaotic mess of events, the Sorcerer King had arrived.

“However, His Majesty seems to have sensed your presence here.”

The best proof of that was the Sorcerer King's snort of laughter as he looked at the room next door.

"If it goes poorly, everything we've talked about might well have been leaked."

"What? That means…?"

"Exactly what you think. He also meant for you to hear his words."

The acoustics of this room were tuned such that everything said here could be heard in the other. Because of that, Rakesheer — who was hiding in the room next door — should have heard everything the two of them had said.

"Do you think he could have been mistaken?"

"No, that's impossible. To some extent, he should have sensed someone was there. However, His Majesty might have thought it was someone from the temples."

At that time he had been more confused than shocked due to the suddenness of the situation. When he thought back to it, all he felt was regret for his actions. How he wanted to laugh at himself, who stowed his friend out of the way.

He should have invited Rakesheer out, so the three of them could speak their minds.

Granted, the Sorcerer King probably had not put all his cards on the table yet. However, he had stated his opinions to a mere citizen, with the regal bearing of a ruler. How had he performed, in contrast?

As he watched Ainzach knit his brows, Rakesheer icily asked:

"Then, what will you do next? No, I already know. After all, you used to call him the Sorcerer King, but now you refer to him respectfully."

"Don't you think someone might be listening in on our conversation?"

"Don't you think that's the reason I'm telling you this now?"

“Could it be that I was magically charmed?”

“I’m not confident in completely ruling it out, but I don’t think so. Charm magic is time-limited, and even if the Sorcerer King wanted to sustain it, he probably would not be able to.”

“Then again, it might be possible for His Majesty.”

“Come on, give me a break. That would be a real headache if it was true. After all, that’s magic of the 8th tier and above, the realm of the divine.”

The two of them laughed briefly, and then Ainzach resumed his serious expression.

“I believe helping His Majesty in this matter is a good idea.”

“Even if that makes you all accomplices in invading other countries?”

“...Is it not natural for strong nations to subjugate weaker ones?”

“So you know it will result in tragedy and have chosen to permit it?”

“Things may not necessarily develop in that way. After all, ever since His Majesty took control of this country, who among us is worse off?”

Rakesheer fell silent.

The surprising thing was that nobody in this country could say they were in a worse situation than before.

“Aren’t there adventurers who lost their jobs because of this?”

“Well, you’re right, but isn’t it a little… come on, lay off me already.”

“That’s true. I spoke without thinking. Still, given that this was such a rare opportunity, why didn’t you ask the Sorcerer King what he thought about the temples?”

"Give me a break. If His Majesty decided that they were a nuisance and decided to destroy them because of something I said, I'd have to live the rest of my life knowing I caused a great slaughter. How do you think I could live with myself if that happened?"

"Do you think the Sorcerer King is someone who would do such a thing?"

"No. In fact, I'd say it's the opposite. His Majesty is very rational, to the point where it's quite shocking. To the point where sometimes, I wonder if that undead face of his was actually made by magic. Yes — it feels just like when I talk to Momon-dono."

"Well, that would be a slight on Momon-dono."

Ainzach smiled thinly as he saw his old friend with a displeased look on his face.

"Well, that's true. It's disrespectful to compare a hero of humanity to the undead Sorcerer King. However, when you consider that they're both beings of superhuman might, they do seem quite similar. If I had to describe it… yes, I can feel the same presence around them, one which only those extraordinary entities could radiate."

"I see. That does make sense when you put it that way."

The two of them recalled the form of that great hero (Momon).

Then, after that brief pause, Ainzach looked directly at Rakesheer.

"—Rakesheer. If you do not wish to aid His Majesty, could I trouble you to not come here any more?"

The reason for that hardly needed to be said. After all, Ainzach's room might well be used to store data pertaining to the national administration of the Sorcerous Kingdom. Allowing outsiders to traipse in and out of such a room was definitely not appropriate.

In addition, the Sorcerer King's words — which had made such a great impact on Ainzach's heart — had also been spoken to his old friend.

The new vision of adventurers of which he had spoken was a shining and glorious one. In the past, there had been adventurers who had set foot upon unknown lands. However, most of them died far from their homes, or had broken down in the face of reality. Only a handful of people could actually do such a dangerous thing. But now, the Sorcerer King — a magic caster who wielded absolute power — was offering his full support to them. That opened up a whole new vista of possibilities to them.

Contained within that was the possibility of becoming true Adventurers.

After a brief pause, Rakesheer finally spoke.

“I say, Ainzach. You do know that the Magician’s Guild in this city is practically disbanded, right?”

“Ahh, so it is.”

“Then, please allow me to support you with all my strength, as your former comrade. After all this is over, why not let us go explore the unknown as well?”

“—Haha,” Ainzach chuckled. “Think of our age, though. Huhu — are we really going for it?”

“Why not? Although, you’ll have to speak to His Majesty then, and convince him not to put an age restriction on the Adventurer’s Guild.”

And so the two of them filled the room with their cheerful laughter.

OVERLORD VOLUME 10

CHAPTER 2

THE RE-ESTIZE KINGDOM

Part 1

The magic item in his pocket vibrated, and Climb took it out.

It was a pocketwatch, just large enough to fit into his palm, with three hands — the hour, the minute, and the second — which traced a halo of twelve numbers.

While large mechanical clocks existed, personal watches only existed within the Kingdom as magic items. As pocket watches were closely linked to everyday life, they were fairly cheap, as far as magic items went. That said, they were still not something a commoner could afford.

Climb had borrowed the pocketwatch which he now bore, and so it differed from regular magic items in that it possessed a magical ability. The name of the watch was Twelve Magical Power. Once per day, when the watch reached a set time, it would unleash its magic.

However, one would need to have carried the pocket watch for at least a full day in order to enjoy that ability, so Climb — who had just obtained this watch — could not make use of its magic.

“Hm? Is it time already? That was fast…” said the girl who seemed to be looking aimlessly at the blue sky. Naturally, those words were addressed to Climb.

“It seems that way,” Climb answered the girl — Tina, a member of the adamantite-ranked adventurer party “Blue Rose”.

“Hm~ It’s hard to tell the time when we’re spacing out.”

One could poke many holes in that statement.

To begin with, Tina was not spacing out. She was guarding the main door of the building behind Climb. While she had said things like “Is it time already” and “That was fast”, the fact was that she had a very acute perception of time.

There were some people in the adventuring community whose time perception was preternaturally keen. In particular, many people in the thieving profession had trained up that ability. It was very important to them, given that they often needed to move independently on stealth operations.

“Hm? Were you about to say something?”

“No, not really.”

Tina replied with a “Is that so,” when she heard Climb’s answer, and then looked at the sky again.

She was hiding something. Yet, there was no way someone like Climb could ask why she was lying.

In the first place, they did not have the money to hire Tina and the others; they just happened to be operating in the same area by chance. Given their lack of manpower, he could not do anything which might upset her.

“Then, I will go report to the Princess.”

“See ya~”

Climb turned toward the building he had been protecting all this while.

He had seen it during its construction several times, but this was the first time he had laid eyes on it after it was complete. The size of the building — and the presence of his mistress within it — filled the depths of Climb’s heart with warmth.

After opening the door, the unique scent of recently-completed woodwork reached Climb's nose.

He continued forward, and after passing through the corridor, he opened the door to a room in the depths of the building.

Within that room was his mistress.

She was a stunningly beautiful princess, Renner.

Surrounding her were several children.

The way she smiled tenderly at the rowdy children and the posture which she took to listen to their words made all who saw her think of a saint.

As he beheld this picturesque scene, Climb lost the ability to speak.

He was afraid that he would ruin this sacrosanct vision before him. The same applied to the women who stood by the window, none of whom dared do anything unnecessary.

However, someone within the room did not share their feelings.

"Oi, it's the little punk. Well, it's about time."

Renner raised her head in response to the cold voice which came from below the mask, and looked directly at Climb.

Climb could see himself reflected in those eyes which reminded him of sapphires.

"...My deepest apologies, Renner-sama. It is time to return to the Palace."

"Is that so~ Then, although it pains me to do so, I must take my leave."

The kids chorused "Ehhhhhh~", in voices filled with longing and reluctance. They would not have made such a sound if she had not thoroughly ensnared their hearts.

In response to the children, the other women hurriedly sprang into action. They patted the children soothingly, and pulled away those children who were slower on the uptake from Renner's side.

"Everyone, can I come play with you again?"

The kids energetically answered in the affirmative to Renner's question.

"Then, we'll cook next time. Climb, let's go, You too, Evileye-san."

"Hm~ Well, I'm your bodyguard too, even if you don't say it — although, since this isn't a request, it's more like we happen to be travelling together. Don't worry, I'll be behind you."

The group exited the building just as a horse-drawn carriage drew up nearby.

Tina entered the carriage without introducing herself. Although it seemed like she was being rude, she was simply ensuring the safety of the carriage. Shortly after that, Renner, Climb and finally Evileye entered one after the other, and then the carriage set off.

Within the bumpy carriage, Evileye could not help but mumble:

"...It must have been pretty hard to build an orphanage like that."

"Pretty hard?"

"Yes. A lot of people are saying that too. Where in the world did you get all that money to spend on a place like that?"

Renner cupped her chin with one hand, tilting her head slightly.

"I don't think so, right? Onii-sama was quite happy to listen to my request. Besides, it's because the world is like this that we need to take good care of the children, right?"

Evileye raised her chin slightly, as though to permit her to continue speaking.

“As we all know, the ruler of the Sorcerous Kingdom has caused many deaths. As a result, I believe there are many orphans who have lost their parents. Thus, this orphanage was built to protect those orphans. In addition, those women who have lost their husbands will also need a place to work, right?”

“The Sorcerer King, huh… well, we’ll talk about that later. Couldn’t that money be better spent on things besides these brats? If you ask me, the weak losing their lives is just the way things work in this world, no?”

“That’s not right.”

Renner’s statement was clear and succinct. Unlike her tone from just now, those words were filled with tremendous power.

“Saving the weak is what the strong should do. And…”

Climb felt Renner’s eyes suddenly turning to him.

Perhaps—

The image of himself as a child appeared in Climb’s mind.

Perhaps the Princess had built the orphanage because she remembered his state from that time. In a way, it was to prevent children like Climb from appearing again.

A wave of heat flashed through his chest.

Of course, he could not verify the Princess’ actual thoughts. Even so, Climb did not doubt that it was that way.

“Well, I’m sure some people would think that way, And it seems wrong to force my own views on others. Still, did you really have to make it so big?”

“Yes. After all, we have to consider that we will take in many children in the future, and there will be others from those regions directly administered by the Crown. With that in mind, even a building of that size might not be big enough. Children are my treasure, and we need to take care of them to make sure they don’t go down the wrong path.”

“Hmmm. Hime-sama, that’s a good head on your shoulders.”

“What are you trying to say, Tina?”

“I was thinking about how children without their parents would live, Evileye.”

“That is… I see… since we can’t spare precious manpower to replenish the depleted number of troops, you’re using alternate means to maintain public order… I see.”

“One can live a good and righteous life under supervision. But people will end up following their desires if they are not careful. And then, when they commit those crimes, they will fall further into wickedness. Thus do small sins grow larger, like a rolling snowball, so we should not let such chances appear. However, since it is difficult, we use these methods to reduce those chances.”

“Hm. So you’re saying, ‘—Not everyone has a strong will’, then?”

“Well, people have said that about you before, Evileye — could it be it’s bothering you?”

“I think she’s said something like that about three times already.”

While the latter half was something that nobody but Evileye and Tina could understand, the first half was simple enough that even Climb could understand.

Those children who had lost their parents often turned to crime in order to survive. If that happened, even the weakened Eight Fingers would soon return to full strength, which would worsen the security of the Royal Capital.

In other words, his beloved lady had done this to prepare for the future.

However — Renner asked Evileye in a curious tone:

“—What does that mean?”

“Oi… did we read too deeply into it? Or is this just an act?”

“Hm~ it looked genuine enough at a glance.”

“Well, if you say so, then it must be true. I feel like I was moved for nothing.”

“Well, it feels like you’ve decided to lower your opinion of me all of a sudden… but, it’s true. I think about a lot of things, you know? Right now, this orphanage is giving these kids a certain degree of education, and once we start identifying talented individuals among them, the other nobles will surely start to copy us. Because of that, we need a certain amount of kids… Although that’s not really something to be proud of.”

“No, I can understand gathering those brats for that reason, and it’s pretty admirable too. If you can actually produce results, it would be worthy of praise. It’s just that people are going to be suspicious if you do something without expecting anything in return.”

“Evileye’s heart is twisted because she works too hard.”

“Oi! You’re the same type as me, aren’t you?”

“Certainly not. I am very pure. It’s only you who has been stained.”

Cheh! The sound of an explosive scoff came from beneath the mask.

“Yup, yup. Brain-san gave me the idea of building the orphanage.”

“Brain Unglaus, huh. What happened to him. How come he isn’t around today?”

“Brain-san is busy with something else. He’s running around the Capital now.”

“Hoh? Could there be something more important than protecting the Princess?”

“Yes. He’s doing something in order to fulfil the wishes of the late Warrior-Captain. And, about the Warrior-Captain… well, thank you for your help.”

Tina narrowed her eyes, as though to conceal her feelings.

“Well, I’m pretty annoyed that our oni leader’s pretty face got hurt.”

“I am very sorry about that. Please allow me to apologize on Father’s behalf.”

“I know you’ve already apologized to the boss, which is why I forgive you.”

“Thank you very much.”

“...It seems that sometimes, the words of the dead are more powerful than those of the living.”

For a moment, Evileye glanced out of the carriage as she was deep in thought. Of course, that was just for a moment.

“Speaking of which, what is Brain Unglaus doing?”

“Well, the Warrior-Captain told Brain that he hoped for Brain to succeed him as Warrior-Captain, but he felt that he was not up to the task. Therefore, he’s looking for someone suitable to become the next Warrior-Captain and then he’s going to train him up.”

“So he’s looking for someone who’s not from a noble family… I see — after all, both Gazef and Brain were commoners. So he was thinking in that direction. And what you took away from that was—”

“—That’s right, to build the orphanage. Next time, I’ll go visit the children with Brain-san. For all we know, there might be a talented child among them.”

“Well, I’m hardly that perceptive,” Tina said. “How about you, Evileye?”

“You can’t discern magical talent at a glance. At the very least, they’ll need to go through a lot of magical training before I can roughly understand whether or not they can use magic. In addition, that’s only for arcane magic. If those brats are talented at spiritualism or divine magic instead, I won't be able to see anything.”

Renner went “Hmmmm~” in a bothered tone, and then a smile blossomed on her face.

“Then, in future, I think we ought to invite all sorts of people to the orphanage and have them look over the children for talents.”

Renner was looking at the two of them, apparently trying to convey something with her gaze. To some extent, it was more persuasive than actual speech.

“...That’s pretty naïve. But if it was her, ah—”

“I’m sorry, Evileye, if it was our oni leader—”

“—Yes. Still, I won’t agree so easily, even if it’s for her, no? After all, we need a certain amount of remuneration for this — since we’ve been hired, we’ll need a minimum payment. Besides, if we don’t collect anything, it’ll be bad for the others too. It’ll also violate the adventurers’ rules. In addition, a price has to be paid for teaching techniques.”

“Well, I do agree with everything you’ve said, but I’m very sorry. The truth is, I don’t have any money…”

Renner hung her head in dejection as she said that.

The Third Princess was a spare among spares, and nobody had any expectations of Renner besides her ability to join a noble family to the royal bloodline through marriage. Because of that, no nobles backed her, and she thus lacked any money of her own to spend as she wished. Of course, this was not much of a hardship for Renner, who lived a simple lifestyle. However, there was no way that the First or Second Princesses would be able to tolerate this sort of thing.

Because of that, Climb could keenly feel her intentions through the armor he wore.

“I’ve heard princesses all wear pretty dresses and lead graceful lives...”

“Reality’s hardly that nice. Still, we can’t say there aren’t any princesses like that.”

As he watched Princess Renner's eyes light up with admiration, an emotion which he could not express with words welled up within Climb's heart.

How he wanted to give that sort of life to she who was both the most beautiful person in the world, and who had the most noble soul in the world.

On the flip side, all this had been because of her. He was standing here now because she had saved him. Just then, Renner turned her face, and her sparkling eyes met Climb's own from the side.

"—Thinking of something, Climb?"

"Ah, no, it's nothing, Renner-sama."

"Is that so? Well, if you think of anything, you should speak up. We need to help each other in tough times, after all."

"Ah, yes! Thank you very much!"

"Oi. Sorry to interrupt you lovebirds, but I really don't like handing down my skills for free. No matter what she says, I'm still going to ask for an appropriate payment."

"I will strive to meet your price."

Renner lowered her head.

"Hmm~ but what you want to know is whether they have talent or not, right, Hime-sama? If it's me, I can watch their movements, but how about you, Evileye?"

"Ah, I'll level with you. You can't fathom a person's depths just by seeing them carry out a few exercises. Magical ability is more internal than external. In addition, I might seem like a genius when it comes to magical ability, but that's all there is. I don't have the abilities of that great magic caster from the Empire."

"So, identifying talents—"

“Talents, huh,” Renner sighed. “It would be a big help if we could identify them during childhood. It would also help soften the nobles’ stubbornness toward the commoners too.”

“Then, how about setting up a universal identification system for talents in children? There are 3rd-tier spells which can verify the presence or absence of a talent. However, if you want a full picture of what that talent might be, you’d probably need a higher-tiered spell… well, in the end it’s just an idle conjecture.”

“Really? Can you really identify talents?”

“Well, I don’t know what that sparkle in your eyes is for, but don’t get your hopes up. I’ve heard there’s a 3rd-tier spiritualist-only spell which can verify if someone before the caster’s eyes has a talent. That said, even if there was such a spell, the troublesome part would come after that. You’d need to learn how to properly develop that talent. And it’s also quite likely that after expressing that talent, it’ll end up being a meaningless ability.”

“Is that so…”

The light in Renner’s eyes dimmed.

“I think it would be better to test them in various ways. Have them stand under a waterfall, or have them inhale some relatively safe sleeping drugs to go into a trance. Apparently, it makes you sense your own natural talent, mixed up with something else. ”

“Really? ...Hm, is that really true?”

“Ara, do you have a natural talent too, Evileye-san?”

At this, the hitherto chatty Evileye suddenly fell silent. It would seem someone had brought up a topic she did not want to discuss.

However, his master was clueless enough to actually ask that question.

“Could you tell me what kind of talent it is?”

It was not that she liked such incisive questioning, but the fact was, she tended to be this way. One might say she did not know how to read the flow of a conversation, or perhaps that she would unintentionally ask about things which were usually quite difficult to bring up.

Neither was it because she did not care about the other party; it was simply because she had grown up in the royal family.

“What, are you getting excited over a question like this?”

“There are very few people with such talents around me, so I’d like to know what sort of ability you have, Evileye-san.”

“Is that so. Well, since it’s gotten to this, I might as well tell you.”

Evileye leaned her body forward, and Renner — her face a picture of excitement — leaned forward as well.

Natural talents could sometimes serve as a trump card, and this was even more so for adventurers. While he did not think Renner would go around blabbing out that secret, Climb felt that this was something which should not be shared lightly.

“This isn’t something I really want other people to hear, so could you bring your ear closer?”

“All right.”

Renner brought her ear close to Evileye.

And then—

“AS IF I’D GO AROUND BLABBING IMPORTANT THINGS LIKE THAT!!!”

Her angry voice echoed through the carriage.

Tina seemed to have anticipated this, and had plugged her ears beforehand.

“How mean! My ears are ringing!”

Renner threw herself into Climb’s embrace. A suitable sound effect for this would be *pomf*.

She looked up from his chest, her eyes brimming with tears.

Climb immediately cast aside such thoughts like “She’s cute”, “She smells nice” and other meaningless things from his mind. It was forbidden to have such fantasies about one’s mistress.

“Evileye-sama, I understand how you feel, but could I ask you to forgive—”

“—Ah? Punk, she’s become like this because you keep spoiling her, no?”

“It, it’s nothing like that, I, it’s not like I spoil the Princess or...”

Even if he wanted to spoil her, there was no way he could do it.

“Yes, I feel that Climb can and should spoil me more. I approve of what you said, Evileye-san.”

“No, no, that’s not right, Princess-sama. It feels kind of wrong…”

“Of course not! If you spoil me more, I can take scoldings like that more easily. Therefore you must spoil me more. Let’s start by napping together like we used to as children. Come, Evileye-san, please go on!”

“Ugh, it’s fine. I’m such an idiot… In any case, I don’t intend to go around telling others my talent, kid. Got it?”

“Is it really that dangerous?”

“Ah, yes. It’s my ace in the hole. If I use it… yes, it would be like if our leader’s sword went berserk. It could easily annihilate an entire city.”

There seemed to be a terrible weight in Evileye’s voice as she said this.

Still, a baffled “Hm?” made its way up from his chest. He wanted to look down, but if he did, it would make him very aware of the reality that Renner was very close to him. There was no way he could do that.

He thought about pushing Renner away, but after taking her soft and fragile body into consideration, he did not know how much force he should use.

As Climb’s heart continued pounding, the conversation continued without him.

“The sword Lakyus carries?”

“Ah, according to her, once it goes wild, it’ll lead to grave consequences. A city, no, a nation, was it? Apparently it’ll be completely wiped out. She did say something about having to use use part of her strength to suppress it…”

“So that’s what was going on… I didn’t know about that…”

Climb had not told his mistress about that demonic sword yet.

“It’s best not to mind it. Our oni leader didn’t mention it to the two of you because she didn’t want you to worry. I’d be glad if you continued pretending like you didn’t know.”

“...I see. I understand. Then I’ll do as you say.”

“Speaking of which, what happened to Aindra-sama? I haven’t seen her around recently...”

“Hm? I don’t think anyone mentioned it, right? Princess, didn’t you tell him?”

“...I forgot. It seems like she’s training with Gagaran-san and Tia-san.”

Evileye took up the verbal baton from Renner and continued.

“The two of them lost their lives during the battle with Jaldabaoth, the Demon Lord who attacked the Kingdom. Of course, they were resurrected after that, but it expended a large amount of their lifeforce. Thus, they need to place themselves in danger, treading the edge of life and death in order to regain their strength."

"In truth, I wish I could have gone with them."

"Still, if you did that, you'd begin to depend on that method somewhere in your heart. The best path to strength is through a small amount of short battles."

"I doubt that."

"Umu, it does seem like the an effective way to "lair-bellup" (level up)... Well, if you don't rely on that method, you might not even be able to stall for time when that fellow attacks the Royal Capital again."

"Stall for time? Ahh — time for that person you recommended, Evileye?"

"Of course! Until that hero-sama can arrive!"

Evileye's mood seemed to have suddenly changed.

One could clearly feel her passion and excitement through that mask of hers.

"It's Momon—sa—sama, right?"

"That's right! The great hero, Momon-sama! The mightiest warrior ever, who swings his twin greatswords like they were little more than twigs! There's no doubt that he's the strongest fighter in the land! Even if Jaldabaoth comes again, as long as Momon-sama is around, he'll definitely slaughter him! Although, it was a shame that he managed to escape last time. Still, that great man should have come up with some way to deal with that by now!"

Overwhelmed by the ardor of her words, all Climb could do was weakly answer, "Ah, yes."

"But will that person really come? Isn't he a minion of that Sorcerer King?"

Tina's expression suggested she was thoroughly exhausted as she spoke out to Evileye, who had her fists clenched.

“Ahhhh~ Momon-sama! Shit, that damn Sorcerer King! To think he would actually dare to take control of that great man! Even if Heaven permits it, I won’t! If only I could defeat him and free Momon-sama! What on earth was he thinking, anyway? Maybe I should go to E-Rantel and ask Momon-sama about his thoughts, how about that?”

“...That will have to wait for after the two of them recover.”

“I’ll just pop over for a bit, and once I familiarize myself with the place I can just teleport back. Plus, if I use [Fly] and travel by myself, it won’t take much time!”

“Evileye, you really do break down once it comes to Momon… Didn’t our oni leader say you can’t do that sort of thing?”

“So help me keep it a secret!”

“Well, my lips are pret~ty loose, so they’ll reveal everything in an instant.”

“Oi, that would be impossible given your prior vocation, right?”

“Alas, I am now Tina of “Blue Rose”, also known as ‘Can’t Keep A Secret To Save Her Life’.”

It was then that Tina’s eyes took on a serious gleam.

“...Hm, this is a good opportunity. I’ve been wanting to ask you, Evileye — can you kill the Sorcerer King?”

Evileye froze. Her excitement drained away in an instant. In its place was the highest-levelled magic caster among adventurers.

“If those rumors are all true — then he is more powerful than any other magic caster. I did some investigations after the incident at the Katze Plains and looked up all my contacts — I even got in touch with that granny — and then analyzed the information I obtained. However, it’s so ridiculous it’s not even funny any more. It’s absurd to the point where I was seriously suspecting if the punk was mesmerized by an illusion.”

“That was definitely not an illusion. And there were so many dead…”

Renner’s face twisted in agony.

“Of the 260,000 people who took part in that war, 180,000 of them lost their lives. I’ve also heard that there are survivors who were mentally scarred and can’t live a normal life any more. Some of the orphans had fathers who ended up like that.”

“...Well, after listening to the punk, I can see how they’d end up like that. If they were chased by such monsters…”

“...Yes. It was hell. Fortunately, I had Brain-san… and the Warrior-Captain with me, and thanks to those two strong men, I didn’t suffer any mental wounds. Even so, sometimes I reflexively find myself wanting to look back over my shoulder. It must have been worse for the peasant levies, and it wouldn’t be strange for them to become mentally ill as a result.”

“You really need to thank your luck for that.”

Climb could only nod in response.

“Then, Tina. Let me answer your question honestly. I cannot defeat the Sorcerer King.”

That was the answer she had expected.

“As I thought…”

“Well, yes. I might be able to think of a way to deal with those monsters he summoned. Granted, it’s hard to say that, given that I was not at the scene. Still, the Sorcerer King — who can not only summon multiple monsters of that kind and control them — is a being that should not exist in this world. Someone like that possesses the power of the gods.”

“Is it possible that they could have been summoned from an item, and not from the Sorcerer King’s power?”

"The possibility does exist, but if that was the case, it would also be very dangerous. That said, we have no way of verifying that."

"If only he would end up coming into conflict with Jaldabaoth."

"That's a development we're all looking forward to. After that, the best-case scenario would be Momon-sama slaying the Sorcerer King…"
……」

"Who do you think is stronger, between Momon-sama and the Sorcerer King?"

The person who asked this question was Climb, but personally, he felt that the Sorcerer King that had summoned those powerful monsters was far superior. Yet, Evileye's pensive expression shocked him.

"I'm not sure. Personally, I feel that Momon-sama — who drove off that Jaldabaoth — is stronger. But the Sorcerer King also possesses unimaginable might. Both sides are far superior to us, to the point where I can't even picture the outcome."

"Still, having someone like him under the banner of the Sorcerer King is pretty much the worst-case scenario. Nobody would dare declare war on him."

Indeed.

The only person who might be able to take the Sorcerer King on even terms had instead become his vassal. That was a truly troubling development. Anyone who declared war on the Sorcerer King would effectively be declaring war on two Sorcerer Kings.

Just as the mood in the carriage grew grim, there was a knocking on the board which separated the passenger compartment of the coach from the driver's seat, and then it opened.

"We'll be reaching the Royal Palace soon."

As she heard the driver's words, Renner slowly rose to her feet, and locked eyes with the two adventurers seated before her.

"Today, I have received your care in various ways. When Lakyus returns, I will thank her properly. May I ask if you have time to dine with me?"

◆ ◆ ◆

After the report of his younger sister's return reached him, the Second Prince — Zanack Valreon Igana Ryle Vaiself — departed his chambers to welcome her home.

The location of his elder brother — Barbro Andrean Ield Ryle Vaiself — was still unknown. Given that a long time had passed, his chances of survival were considered extremely small. That being the case, Zanack was effectively the heir to the throne. Thus, the way in which he went to receive his younger sister was entirely inappropriate. While they were siblings, there was a clear distinction in their respective stations.

The reason why he had chosen to go in person despite knowing that fact was because he had a proposal he urgently wanted to discuss with her. Zanack might not have been entirely willing to do so, but he had lost his closest confidant and thus had nobody else to turn to.

Soon, his younger sister appeared before him.

Climb — clad in his pure white armor — was close by. Wherever Renner went, Climb often followed her. This too was nothing out of the ordinary.

The pauper's child that Renner had picked off the streets — Climb.

In the past, he had thought she must have gotten a bee in her bonnet and picked him up out of a moment's fancy. However, after he came to understand Renner's strange personality and her incomparable intellect, Zanack began to think she might have had a reason for doing so.

And then, after Jaldabaoth assaulted the Royal Capital, and the Sorcerer King wrought his grand massacre, he slowly began to understand the meaning behind her actions.

There were very few warriors in this city who were stronger than Climb. Even among the men of Gazef's hand-picked warrior band, one could count the number of people who were stronger than Climb on one hand.

In addition, there was the man called Brain Unglaus, who had come with Climb, as well as her close friendship with Lakyus, the leader of the adamantite-ranked adventurer party called "Blue Rose". There was no doubt that his younger sister now possessed the most physical power in the Royal Capital.

—Was she really not conspiring to overthrow him with military force?

Zanack was right to suspect her of doing so.

Even if Renner was not one to resort to such measures so easily, one still had to take precautions. Therefore, Zanack had begun to secretly build ties with orichalcum and mithril-ranked adventurers.

Zanack quietly thanked his elder brother.

The reason why he could work so hard on these matters was because his brother had gone missing and had virtually left him the throne. Another big reason was because his brother's stipend now went to him.

That said, the fact that Crown Prince Barbro's corpse had not yet been found left a hint of unease in his heart. It would be very troublesome if he had been imprisoned by the Sorcerer King or was hiding in a village somewhere while recovering from his wounds.

"Really… Is he going to give me trouble right until the end?" Zanack muttered, quietly enough so that the members of his retinue could not hear.

He had to avoid agitating the nobles before he consolidated his position.

Currently, Zanack's backing was still not very secure.

Marquis Raeven — who had joined with him to revitalize the Kingdom — had thrown off Zanack's hand as he reached out to pull him back, and returned to his own lands. It could not be helped, as he had lost many people from his demesne, but at that time, there had been an air around him which seemed to say that he would never be coming back again.

Part of the reason for that must have been the deaths of his formerly orichalcum-ranked adventurer team and that of his peasant-turned-strategist, a man who Raeven considered a treasure.

Zanack felt a slight pain pricking at his gut. Could discussing matters with his younger sister soothe that pain?

He had been agonizing over a certain problem for the past few weeks.

That was — should he offer a tribute to the Sorcerer King? If he did so, should he send them in the name of celebrating the founding of his nation? Or should he do so for another reason?

Judging by the current circumstances, not sending the gift would be the right choice. Why would anyone send a gift to someone who had taken one's own territory and founded a nation on it? The surrounding countries would surely take it as a mark of vassalage. That said, it was crucial to remain on the best of terms with the Sorcerous Kingdom.

Though the Sorcerous Kingdom's fighting strength remained unknown, the fact that the Sorcerer King could destroy a nation by himself was common knowledge.

No matter what, he had to avert the possibility of that man's eye turning to the Kingdom once more.

Because of that, he had to send a gift. Zanack felt that it could not be helped, even if other nations believed it to be a sign of fealty. No matter what, he had to buy as much time as possible.

However, the nobles would never accept that. This was the troublesome part.

The Sorcerer King's might was widely known. That said, there was no way they would accept an attitude of submission from the future ruler of the Kingdom (Zanack), even in the face of that strength.

The nobles had suffered tremendous losses, so they were looking for scapegoats upon which to vent their frustration.

Due to the loss of his confidant Gazef Stronoff, the current King, Ranpossa III, was overcome with grief and despair, and had fallen into a state of extreme mental distress. To some extent, seeing the King in this sad state had mollified the nobles' anger, but their hatred toward their broken King — and perhaps the entire royal family — would not vanish so easily.

If that fellow was around, he'd probably be able to come up with something good.

If possible, he would have like to have come to a conclusion himself. However, time was tight, and he needed a plan for action soon.

Zanack stood in place, while stomping his boots loudly.

Renner reacted to the sound, and turned to look at him. Then, she changed her direction and headed toward Zanack. That way, Zanack's dignity as one of higher rank would remain intact.

Soon, his younger sister stood before him, but Zanack did not speak first. Moments like this were very delicate. He had to let more people understand who exactly was on top here.

"I've returned, Onii-sama."

"Welcome back, my sister."

In the face of Renner's respectful greeting, Zanack responded with equal generosity. He saw Climb saluting from the corner of his eye, but there was no need to return the salute of a mere soldier.

"Let us walk together."

"It would be my pleasure, Onii-sama."

Zanack and Renner set out together, side by side. He raised his chin, indicating that his retinue should keep their distance. If he had looked over, he would have seen Renner gesturing to Climb that he was permitted to stay further away.

“Speaking of which, Onii-sama, you seem quite worried. What has happened?”

Renner smiled as she gently asked her question.

“Could it be that the Sorcerous Kingdom has sent an envoy over?”

Zanack could distinctly hear his heart thump in his chest. He had been too focused on what action to take on his part, and had completely overlooked the fact that they might try to initiate contact with him.

In other words, Renner felt that it was about time for the other side to take action.

Zanack made a mental note of that, and shook his head.

“It’s not like that.”

“That is to say, you came all this way to see me for some other reason?”

“Ahh. I was pondering the problem of tribute.”

“I think that once their emissary arrives, it would be better for you to offer twice as much as what you are currently imagining, Onii-sama. Half of that is a token of thanks for their coming all this way, while the other half — I trust that goes without saying?”

Zanack did not say anything, but carefully reviewed Renner’s proposal.

Indeed, it was a very good move.

Surely none of the nobles would object to presenting a gift to a guest who had come to their home, even if there were ulterior motives for doing so.

The fact that Renner had instantly solved a problem which had been troubling him for a long time once more struck fear into Zanack’s heart. In addition, as long as Renner possessed her powerful subordinates, even assassination would not be effective. That being the case, his only option was to try and appease her.

“...When I become the King, I will grant you land on the border. You will proceed there.”

“I understand. I shall obey any orders that you give me, Onii-sama.”

“After I send you out, I will not summon you to the Royal Capital again. It might somewhat limit your freedom, but I will choose a domain which ensures you do not suffer hardship. You should spend the rest of your life there.”

“I see. My deepest thanks.”

In all likelihood, Renner already understood what he was aiming for, but he had to actually vocalize it in order to let her understand the kindness he was showing to her.

“You may take any of the orphans to be your children. In that respect you may do as you please.”

“Thank you very much, Onii-sama.”

The fact that she replied without a delay was evidence that Renner already knew what Zanack was going to say.

Zanack could not understand why Renner loved Climb the commoner. His looks were very plain, and he was not particularly special. He did not seem to match his little sister at all.

Ahh, come to think of it, I heard of her fetish back then.

Once he recalled that shameful memory of his little sister, Zanack began to feel a little sorry for Climb.

“Then, I do look forward to the day you will become King, Onii-sama. After your coronation, I would be happy if you would think of me from time to time as I live on a farm.”

“Ohh, I shall, my dear sister. However, it would be best if I could look you up for a discussion from time to time — muu?”

Zanack turned his gaze to the soldier that was jogging over to them.

That man was one of the surviving members of Gazef’s warrior band.

He had fought to protect the King on that battlefield. Now that the Warrior-Captain was gone, he had a good position and the trust of the King. Incidentally, Renner’s two subordinates enjoyed that same trust.

The mental image of his father’s withered frame appeared before his eyes.

“My Prince, His Majesty desires your presence.”

The instant he finished that, he turned to look at Renner.

“He requests your presence as well, my Princess.”

“What happened?”

“We have just received a report that the Sorcerer King will be sending a diplomatic party to call on us soon.”

Zanack snuck a look at Renner, but still managed to answer the man.

“I understand. Notify him that we will be arriving shortly. My sister, I will be proceeding first. Please proceed with all haste once you are ready.”

“I understand, Onii-sama.”

Given that she had been at the orphanage until recently, Renner’s clothes were plain and weathered. Appearing like that before the nobles would only embarrass herself.

With that, Zanack stalked off with a stern expression on his face.

“Hmph. Things being as they are, that proposal is no longer appealing. Ah, it’s too late, after all.”

Part 2

It was estimated that the envoys of the Sorcerous Kingdom would take about a week to travel from E-Rantel to the Royal Capital.

Today was the seventh day. If all went according to plan, the envoys would reach the Royal Capital today.

Zanack, dressed in armor that he was not accustomed to, stood in line with his knights at the gates of the Royal Capital which faced E-Rantel.

The cloudy weather of the past few days had cleared up, like it had all been a joke, and the sky was the very picture of spring.

However, one could see heavy cloud cover in the distance. It would seem the azure sky was limited to the air directly above the Royal Capital.

This sort of scenery was quite bizarre. In fact, the Royal Capital’s meteorologist had shouted, “This is impossible!” as he scratched his head.

He had been working in the Royal Palace for a long time now, and he could predict the next day’s weather with over 90% accuracy. Thus, when he declared that this was impossible, it implied that these blue skies were anything but natural.

Zanack sighed deeply under his helmet.

He had never heard of weather-controlling magic from his teachers. However, that Sorcerer King might well be able to use such magic with contemptuous ease.

Zanack’s men were not only unskilled in the area of magic, but they lacked any knowledge of other strange phenomena. This made his head ache. More accurately, it was because he had relied too heavily on Marquis Raeven.

He had gathered the knowledge from his adventurers, compiled it, and called it the Tiger Scroll. It contained information on various kinds and appearances of magic items, the types and powers of various monsters, all sorts of spells, and so on.

Until now, he had freely shared that scroll with Zanack, his ally. However, since Raeven was no longer in the Royal Capital, the Tiger Scroll was naturally gone with him.

He had tried to find nobles who had learned from adventurers, like Raeven had, but sadly, there were none. This was not because these nobles were stupid, but because they lived in a completely different world from those adventurers. While some nobles did hire adventurers, it was merely to make use of their strength. The nobles were not interested in the adventuring world or the news which adventurers had.

The nobles had been that way throughout the Kingdom's 200 years of history. From that point of view, Raeven was quite atypical.

It's probably hard to find retired adventurers — especially those of mithril rank and above.

He heard that adventurers hated troublesome things like politics. Indeed, once one entered the world of politics, one would lose one's freedom. Would adventurers like that want to work for him after retiring?

Zanack's heart sank as he thought about that.

"—My Prince!"

The shout of the knight next to him brought Zanack back to his senses. He looked to the end of the street — and saw it.

He could begin to make out the Sorcerous Kingdom's envoys.

They had exerted pressure beforehand to shut this street down for today, closing it to traffic. As a result, nobody would be popping out of doors behind them. The city gates had also been locked down just for today.

“All right, let’s go over this again. We are to treat them like foreign dignitaries. Trying anything on the envoys of the Sorcerous Kingdom is a grave offense. It will be punished by summary execution.”

“Sir!”

The reply of the ranked knights was quite forceful, and the swords at their waists made a clear, crisp and unified sound.

“All right! Then, show them the utmost respect, and impress the glory of the Kingdom upon them!”

“Sir!”

The group remained absolutely still until the envoys had arrived.

Before long, the envoys’ vanguard reached them.

It was a black-armored knight. It rode a red-eyed unicorn that had a jet black body and sported two horns on its head. One could imagine that the rider was not human either. It emanated an aura of mortal danger, as radiant as the sun. Its full plate armor pulsed as if it was alive.

Zanack could feel his warhorse trembling in fear beneath him.

It clenched its clawed gauntlet and thumped its chest.

“Apologies! We are the envoys of the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown!”

One might compare that voice to music squeezed out of rotted instruments. It made its listeners’ hair stand on end just by hearing it. Zanack gathered up his courage to banish his fear, and then he spoke.

“I am the Second Prince of the Kingdom of Re-Estize, Zanack Valreon Igana Ryle Vaiself! By His Majesty’s order, I am to guide your party to the Royal Palace. Please follow behind us!”

“Acknowledged. Then, we shall avail ourselves of your guidance. This one — forgive me, this one does not bear a name, so please allow this one to introduce itself by the name of its species. This one is a Death Cavalier!”

Zanack gawked a little when it had given the name of its species, but he responded immediately so as not to give offense through his delay.

“Then, may I address you as Cavalier-dono?”

“This one would be honored to be addressed in that manner.”

“I see. Then, may I greet the leader of the envoys? As the Second Prince, I am also responsible for said leader’s actions within the Kingdom. If possible, I would like to explain the circumstances to your leader.”

“Acknowledged. This one shall convey your message to our leader-dono.”

“You have my deepest thanks.”

With that, the outrider retreated to deliver his report.

While the whole process sounded quite laughable at times, he was facing up against the Sorcerous Kingdom, after all. It was a nation that could control the undead and make use of monsters, so it would be best to assume that the usual ways of doing things were inapplicable here. He felt stupid for even expecting the leader of the envoys to have a vaguely human shape.

“Now then, stiff upper lips, everyone. We cannot afford to do anything that would offend them.”

“Sir!”

As he heard the knights’ response, Zanack poured strength into his belly.

The envoys had passed through several towns on the way here, which was how Zanack knew of the party’s composition.

There were five coaches.

Each of them was pulled by a horse-shaped monster that radiated an inauspicious air. Then, there were numerous Death Cavaliers, who had been tasked with perimeter security. There were also other monsters beside them.

Zanack was unclear on the names of those monsters or how dangerous they were. Still, whether he knew them or not, his duties remained unchanged. Since they were envoys dispatched by the Sorcerer King, he could not possibly allow any slight to be shown to them.

A Death Cavalier — probably the same one from just now — approached him from the envoys' side.

"Forgive the long wait. Our leader — the right hand of the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown, Albedo-sama, has agreed to meet with you. Zanack-dono, please, proceed this way."

After signalling to the other knights to hold their position, Zanack guided his horse after the Death Cavalier.

In all honesty, it was quite terrifying.

After all, Zanack was moving amongst monsters he had never seen before.

Even so, he still had his pride as a member of the Royal Family. Zanack would soon be the King, and since he would have to meet with emissaries of the Sorcerer King, he was forbidden to disgrace himself. Instead, he had to demonstrate his ability at this time, and let them take home news of the talented people in the Re-Estize Kingdom.

Zanack's horse could not keep itself from breaking out into a cold sweat as it approached the coach. Zanack dismounted, standing before the coach.

"Then, this is the leader of the envoy party, Albedo-sama."

What sort of monster is going to show up next? Zanack willed his expression not to change.

The door slowly opened, and a human figure slowly emerged.

What he saw there — was beautiful.

No, Zanack could not think of an adjective that could better describe her. The only thing which came to mind was “world-class beauty”

Nobody in this world could possibly possess looks comparable to Renner’s. Zanack had believed this until now, but then he realised that was mistaken. If Renner’s was a radiant beauty, then Albedo’s was a seductive beauty tinged in darkness.

Albedo trod on the stepboard of the coach. The faint sound of her high heels jolted Zanack back to reality.

Zanack immediately genuflected before her and lowered his head.

One might think that it was embarrassing for a prince of a royal family to kneel before anyone, even if they were an emissary from another nation. However, after considering the difference in power between the Kingdom and the Sorcerous Kingdom, this was the right course of action. What the Kingdom needed now was not glory, but concrete benefits.

“Could you please raise your head?”

The quiet, lovely voice rang out from above him.

“At once.”

As he looked up, the fair maiden’s face was all smiles as she tenderly looked down on him.

This was a practiced attitude which superior men would adopt — no, was she even human?

Zanack moved his eyes to size her up. First, were the wings on her waist magic items, or something else? Similarly, the horns curling out from the sides of her head.

Whether they were magic items or if she was actually a heteromorphic creature, neither of them seemed particularly bizarre once he considered that she hailed from the Sorcerous Kingdom.

“I am the envoy of the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown, Albedo. Though it is but for a few days, we will be imposing upon you. Rise, Prince-dono. You certainly cannot continue speaking as you kneel.”

“You have my deepest thanks.”

Zanack straightened up, and then a problem presented itself.

Though he had learned her name was Albedo through conversation, was that really all?

In the Kingdom — and in the Empire — commoners had two names, nobles had three names, and titled people had four names. For the royal family, they had four names — plus their titles for a total of five names.

This was why Jircniv Rune Farlord El-Nix and his four names were mocked for not being an actual member of royalty. However, a name like Albedo sounded like an alias, or a nickname. One could not possibly be as foolish as to address a member of the nobility by such a moniker.

Though he might have been worrying needlessly, he could not be sure that such a situation would not occur.

The reason why he said this was because many nobles had died in the previous battlefield. It was not just family heads who perished, but even the firstborn heirs of some families. Currently, many noble families were led by the “spares”, the second or third sons.

Spares were spares. Nobody expected much of those nobles. Not only did they lack class, but they lacked knowledge as well. In short, they lacked the appropriate upbringing.

Under normal circumstances, they would have been properly educated by the higher-ups in their faction, but the previous war meant that they no longer had the manpower for such efforts. As a result, many incompetent people were forced onto the center stage, and these incompetent people gathered together to form a faction of incompetents.

Currently, the class of the Kingdom's nobility had plummeted, thanks to these people. At this crucial moment, could they meet a woman like Albedo with adequate etiquette?

"...Forgive me, but may I know how I should properly address you, Albedo-sama?"

This was a somewhat disrespectful question.

Normally, he should have asked. "What title do you hold among the peerage, Albedo-sama, or perhaps what is your position in the Sorcerous Kingdom?"

The problem was, she might have shot back, "Do you not even know the rank of an emissary from your neighboring country?"

Still, that was the fault of the Sorcerous Kingdom.

After all, no information about the Sorcerous Kingdom had flowed out from its borders. Though it had declared its own sovereignty for several months now, they had largely restricted themselves to internal affairs. This was the first time they had engaged in diplomatic relations of their own accord.

All Zanack knew about Albedo was that she was the leader of the envoys, and the hand of the Sorcerer King.

The Empire would probably know… but they didn't tell us anything… Well, anyone who would have asked for that sort of spell to be used on us must hate us to the bone.

As though sensing his worries, Albedo answered:

"Though it may not appear that way, I have been appointed as the supervisor who leads all the Floor Guardians and Area Guardians within the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown."

"Ohh, I see."

He said that, but he had no idea what being the “supervisor” meant. In addition, he was completely clueless regarding the “Floors” of which she spoke.

Albedo continued speaking, having seemingly seen through his concealed confusion:

“Indeed. I am Ainz-sama’s — no, I should say, I am the Sorcerer King’s second-in-command, the Guardian Overseer . Perhaps that would be more appropriate?”

“Ohhh, I see now!”

Ainz-sama, it looks like she’s close enough to address him in that manner. So she’s a marchioness, no, a duchess, perhaps? I need to get this information back to the others. But still, Guardian… Overseer?

“Then, Albedo-sama, permit me to escort you to the Royal Palace. There are suites in the Royal Capital where I pray you will take residence for the time being. My father — King Ranpossa III is of advanced age, so he assigned me the task of meeting you at the gates of the Capital. I pray you will forgive us this slight.”

“It is fine.”

Her smile had not changed at all.

Normally, she should have been thanking the Prince. However, he could clearly sense who was the superior party from her attitude.

Zanack was gushing cold sweat from his back. This was because he understood that forging good relations with them would probably be a very difficult task.

“...In addition, we would normally ring the bells in celebration, but the unfortunate misunderstanding between our countries led to tragedy, so please forgive us for not doing so. In addition, the common folk do not yet know of your arrival, so please take that into consideration.”

“Of course, it is not a problem.”

He had no idea what would the people would do if they knew that an emissary of the Sorcerer King had come to call on them. In that respect, Albedo’s answer was a great relief.

Is it better to think that I owe her a favor?

He was not at all worried that the envoys would be attacked by an angry mob. Those Death Cavaliers — indeed, everyone present was probably very strong, even within the Sorcerous Kingdom. He could easily believe that each of them was a match for that Gazef Stronoff.

“Then, may I ask a few questions of my own?”

“Of course! I will answer as long as it is in my power to do so.”

“Well then, could you tell me of the itinerary after we reach the Royal Palace?”

“Yes! First, there is a dinner scheduled with myself and the rest of the Royal Family tonight. Tomorrow, we will visit the theaters in the day to watch the dances and hold a dinner party at night, where all the nobles of the Kingdom will be invited. The day after that will feature a concert by the Palace’s orchestra — after which we will begin the diplomatic negotiations.”

“So that’s how it is… then, I trust there will be no issues if we decide to freely tour the capital?”

“Of course. We shall select exceptional knights to serve as your guards.”

Although the word itself meant that the knights would defend them, it also implied observation, and even to restrain them if the need arose.

“May I know if any place interests you?”

They would need to completely lock down the area on that day, to make it impossible for commoners to go near that place.

“No… there are no places which particularly interest me. Since I do not know which locations are worth visiting in the capital, could you guide me on a tour?”

“Understood. I shall make the appropriate preparations.”

Albedo smiled as she nodded.

Part 3

For the past month or so, Philip felt that he was one of the luckiest men in the Kingdom.

He was arguably the luckiest of such men, if he did say so himself. However, modesty was a virtue. Besides, there might be other nobles luckier than himself, so it would be best not to speak in absolutes.

Nobles — huh.

Philip tightened up his smile while smoothing out his clothes.

This was only the second time he had participated in a noble party like this. Still, perhaps he should say that this was expected of a dinner party organized by the Royal Family — the sheer decadence of this event outshone the one he had previously attended.

The formal attire of the other guests seemed much more costly than the ones at the earlier party. How much did their outfits cost, anyway? Philip glanced at his own clothes, and began to feel a little frustrated.

As he thought, the upper-class nobles had really awesome clothes.

The noblewomen in their fancy dresses all had smiles on their faces, but were those smiles mocking him for his plain attire? Philip could not help but think that way, even without any basis for such assumptions. When he looked around, he imagined all the surrounding nobles laughing at him.

It’s all because I have no money.

If his domain was wealthier, he would have been able to afford better clothes. However, Philip’s domain had never been that prosperous to begin with. Even his clothes now had been hastily stitched together from his older brother’s formal wear. As a result, they still felt a little tight around the shoulders.

Well, money’s scarce because the family heads until now were useless. So once I become the next head, I’ll make my domain wealthier.

Philip was born the third son of a noble family.

Similar to commoners, third sons were not individuals who were particularly welcome in noble families. No matter how rich a family was, splitting its assets multiple ways would ultimately weaken it. Therefore, it was all inherited by the eldest son. In this respect, the nobles followed the same basic principle as the commoners.

Perhaps a wealthier family might have been able to give a third son some financial support. Perhaps they could count on connections to other noble families and foster him out. However, this was not the case for Philip’s family.

Once the eldest son came of age — in other words, when the chances of him dying of disease were greatly decreased — the third son Philip was no longer necessary to his family.

Would he be given a bit of money and then chased out of the family home? Or perhaps he would be sent to live with a poor family and work like a peasant. He could only see tragedy waiting in both options. Yet, things had not unfolded that way. Instead, he was making his debut at a grand society ball.

That was why Philip felt he was lucky.

The first bit of luck was his elder brother, the second son, dying of illness before he came of age.

Since his eldest brother — the first son — was already a man by then, there was no longer any value to his elder brother, the second son. In addition, theirs was not a wealthy fief, and they could only use herbs instead of priests to treat him. In the end, his condition had taken a turn for the worse, and he shuffled off the mortal coil.

At this point, Philip was now elevated to the position of a spare. His value had risen from that of a farmer to that of a butler.

Things like these were not uncommon.

However, what had catapulted Philip into the upper crust was the result of Philip’s next stroke of luck.

Several years after reaching adulthood, it was time for Philip’s elder brother to take over the family estate. Then, that war with the Empire had broken out. If it had been like previous years, it should have ended after a few bumps and scrapes. Therefore, it was a safe way for his elder brother to obtain a battle record, and his family could take pride in the fact that they had pledged men to the battle.

However, his elder brother had not come back.

He had been consumed by the Sorcerer King’s magic, and perished with the twenty peasants that went with him.

Philip could not forget the instant of joy he felt when he heard that news. It was the joy he had carried within him ever since becoming a spare.

His elder brother’s body was missing, and so was the suit of full plate armor passed down from his ancestors. Still, that was not a big problem. Once his domain grew wealthier, he would make a better suit of armor for himself. The more important thing was that the title of estate heir had gone from unattainable to practically his.

The timing for that was perfect.

If his brother had died after inheriting the family estate, Philip would have had to spend his time waiting for his nephew to grow into a man. However, since his brother had died without claiming his inheritance, his lordship was a done deal.

It was as though the Sorcerer King had gone out of his way to arrange all this for Philip.

Because of that, Philip even felt something like goodwill toward the Sorcerer King that he had never met before. If only he could convey his gratitude directly to the Sorcerer King's emissary.

In addition—

That's right. I'm going to ride on my streak of luck. How can I let such a good chance get away before my eyes?

Philip's heart blazed like a bonfire.

He could only think of his father and elder brother as idiots after seeing what they had been doing all this time. *Why don't you do this? Doesn't this bring you more benefits?* Of course, he never told them that to their faces.

That was because none of the gains made would trickle down to him. Neither would any prestige for doing so be his. Therefore, over a long time, Philip had cooked up ideas on how to properly administer his fief and stored them in his heart.

I will let the nearby lords know that I am the one who deserves this title. I will let Father know how poor his taste was in choosing Nii-san. Selling the good-quality wheat and vegetables to those traders — no, what should I do? That would draw too much attention, and what if my revolutionary proposal was stolen by others? Still, there's no money without trade. I need to find tight-lipped and reliable merchants — in other words, not that guy.

Philip's face twisted as he recalled the face of that merchant.

The unpleasant memory of that man overcame his joy at being able to stand in this lavish hall.

How dare he look down on me! Although I have to bear it for now, once I find a better merchant in the Royal Capital, I'll boot him away! I've already got connections of my own!

Philip had already found his own underground connections during his few weeks in the Royal Capital. His pride at this chased away the unhappiness in his heart.

As expected of me, I've already got my path all mapped out. I'll make my domain rich and obtain a huge fortune. Those idiots who looked down on me will see who's the true idiot now.

Just as Philip was envisioning his glorious golden future, a male voice rang through the hall.

"Ladies and gentlemen! I present to you the leader of the envoys from the Sorcerous Kingdom, Albedo-sama!"

At this moment, the grand hall's orchestra lowered their instruments, and the mood of joviality in the air died down.

Judging by the noises, it would seem the master of ceremonies had just announced the star of the dinner party which the Royal Family was hosting.

"Albedo-sama serves as the right hand of the His Majesty the Sorcerer King in the Sorcerous Kingdom, and commands a position equivalent to that of a prime minister as a Guardian Overseer. Albedo-sama will grace us alone this evening."

A soft woman's voice said, "Huh, alone?". A wealthy-looking noble standing nearby chastised her with a "Quiet, you." Philip felt a little surprised at this.

Coming by oneself is all well and good. But to think someone like that would serve as an emissary! Does the Sorcerous Kingdom truly have such high hopes for the Kingdom?

As Philip wondered what sort of man this emissary would turn out to be, he looked toward the doors by which the master of ceremonies was standing.

"Then, let us welcome the leader of the envoys, Albedo-sama!"

As the great doors opened, the entire hall fell silent.

A goddess-like woman stood there. Her perfect features were more beautiful than any peasant, more beautiful than any whore in the Kingdom's brothels, more beautiful than any woman Philip had ever seen in his life. Of course, the Princess from earlier was pretty, but Philip preferred what he was seeing now.

Her clothes were beautiful as well. Her platinum dress was accented with golden hair ornaments, while the lower half of her dress was covered by what seemed like black feathered wings. Her reflection in the magical lights above made it seem as though she was glowing.

Philip looked at the woman who had spoken earlier. She was standing in place with a retarded look on her face.

What's this, what's this. Is this the sort of face the companion of some big-name noble ought to have? You look just like a roadside peasant.

The elation he felt at at the Sorcerous Kingdom's triumph — to which he was favourably inclined — made the joy of victory surge up in his heart.

"We welcome your presence, Albedo-dono."

Ranpossa III rose to welcome Albedo.

"Your Majesty, I am grateful for this reception."

Philip could only see a side of Albedo's face, but when he saw Albedo's tender smile, he was acutely aware of one thing.

She's beautiful beyond words...

"I do hope you will forgive me for taking a seat, due to my age. Then, nobles of the Kingdom. Our main guest has arrived. Tonight, please enjoy yourselves to your hearts' content. Then, Albedo-dono, I hope you will enjoy yourself as well.

"My thanks, Your Majesty."

A sweet smile bloomed on Albedo's face.

He snuck a peek at that noblewoman from earlier, and saw that she was mumbling something about “she didn’t lower her head” or something along those lines. Philip cast aside that foolish woman and her foolish words and instead feasted his eyes on that world-class beauty.

He burned the image of her speaking closely with Princess Renner into his eyes.

If only I could make that woman mine...

He understood that it would be a very difficult task. However, when one thought about it, it was not completely impossible.

Once my fief becomes wealthy, the other nobles will start introducing their daughters to me. The wealthier I get, the better the girls will be. Even that Princess, even that emissary isn’t out of the question!

Philip felt a wave of heat surge up from his lower body.

Well, the Great Nobles usually have a concubine or three… the best case would be if I could enjoy those two beauties at the same time.

Philip looked back and forth between Renner and Albedo.

Philip hurriedly picked up a beverage from nearby before his fantasies grew out of control,. It would be very bad if he got hard here. The cool sensation of the drink sliding down his throat helped him regain a measure of calm.

Come to think of it, how did they make this ice? Is it magic…

The only people in Philip’s estate who could use magic were the priests. While they could help cure illness, they would demand money for doing so. They would ask for an appropriate payment if they had to make ice.

Since they’re in my domain, I’ll have them heal me for free next time. A mere resident daring to charge his lord money, how ridiculous is that!

Philip made a mental note of this new way to deal with the priests in future.

He looked forward to getting to work on his domain once he returned. He could imagine all his brilliant ideas being put into action, lighting up his life with golden radiance.

—Oya?

When he looked back to Albedo, he saw her standing by herself.

There were many nobles around, but nobody knew how to approach her.

The Sorcerous Kingdom, huh… What will become of the Kingdom after this?

Philip did not particularly care what happened to the Kingdom, but it would be troublesome if it affected his estate.

That being the case—

Philip shuddered at the idea he had just had.

—Oi oi, don't think about such dangerous things. It's just… well, it's not exactly a bad move, right? How should I say this… I can't believe I actually thought of an idea like that...

He looked at the side of Albedo's lonely face.

There's no use in being third. There's no point in being second. The most important thing is to be the first.

The emissary of the Sorcerous Kingdom looked like she had been outcast because nobody was talking to her. Philip had read about how ladies were quite vulnerable to this sort of thing.

Do it. You have to make a gamble to get a return. The chance to rise has come because everything has changed. I'm a lucky man, so I should make good use of my luck.

Philip’s family had always been bound to a faction, but they were typically at the tail end of that faction. There were only so many benefits he could gain from continuing to be bound to that faction.

Then, he recalled some words he had heard recently. A certain very skinny landlady had said, “Why not make a faction of your own?”

After making up his mind, Philip downed the glass of wine he had been holding all this while.

It was unlike the watery wine he had drunk at home. It felt like his throat and belly were burning. As though propelled by the heat which rose from his belly, Philip stepped forward.

“Albedo-sama, mind if I cut in?”

Thanks to his voice, Albedo turned her smile to him.

He was not just blushing because of the wine.

“Ara, how do you do—”

Her brows creased for a moment, as though deep in thought. Philip immediately realized what she was looking for.

“I am Philip.”

“Oh? Ah, Lord Philip — no, Philip-sama. It is an honor to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Albedo-sama. Nothing could delight me more than to make your acquaintance.”

Philip was keenly aware that the air around him seemed to have changed.

A quick glance aside revealed that the higher-ranked nobles had shocked looks on their faces.

He could not stem the joy within him as he realised all eyes at the dinner party sponsored by the Royal Family were on him.

I, I'm now, I'm now the center of attention!

To think that he — who had only eaten cold meals in the past — was now the focus of these people who stood at the pinnacle of the Kingdom. As he thought about this, an unexpected excitement took control of Philip.

That's right! I'm Philip! Watch me! Watch the man who will be the central figure of the Kingdom!

Philip racked his brains, and then made the biggest bet in his life.

That was to say, he invited Albedo to a ball which would take place a couple of days later.

◆ ◆ ◆

"You moron!"

That rebuke extinguished Philip's excitement. Yet, at the same time, it lit a flame within his heart. It was a fire that seemed to consume all the fuel Philip had hidden within his heart his entire life.

Philip looked disdainfully at the white-haired man before him.

"I didn't send you there for that sort of thing! You imbecile!"

Philip sighed as his father asked him about the dinner at the Royal Palace.

"In the first place, that invitation to that dinner party organized by the Royal Family would never have come to our house. I worked my fingers to the bone to secure it so you could express your gratitude to the Count and to the other nobles while you made yourself known to them!"

The Royal Family's dinner party gathered people from both factions. When this happened, the fact that the head of a family had changed would probably not come up. Thus, nobody would pay too much attention to that fact and he would be readily accepted by others. After that, once they had tacitly acknowledged him, it would be quite difficult for them to protest that fact.

In other words, Philip's father had no faith in his abilities at all. He felt that if he had tried to introduce himself to the other members of his faction in the normal manner, he would mess something up.

As Philip realised this, he strove to suppress the annoyance within him, and put on a fake smile.

"No, no, Father. Don't get so worked up. I was doing this for our house—"

"—What do you mean, 'our house'? What you've done is completely absurd!"

What did he mean, absurd, Philip griped in his heart. Everyone else was a coward without the courage to make a move, so why should he not take the first step?

Was he supposed to pretend to be polite to all those incompetent cowards and remain in this pathetic place for the rest of his life?

"Father! Think a little! Although the road joining the Sorcerous Kingdom and the Kingdom is quite long, our domain lies on the middle of it! If the Sorcerous Kingdom makes war on the Kingdom, we'll definitely be drawn into the mess. Therefore, we should forge good relations with the Sorcerous Kingdom, shouldn't we?"

"You, you idiot!"

His father's face was even redder than before.

"Those bastards from the Sorcerous Kingdom killed your brother! And you want to work with them! Isn't that treason against the Kingdom?!"

So what, Philip thought.

Since the Sorcerous Kingdom was stronger, what was wrong with betraying the Kingdom? All he needed to do was pledge his fealty to the Sorcerous

Kingdom. What was wrong with the weak following the strong? Who had the right to reproach him for that?

“What on earth are you thinking?!”

Philip could not help but feel frustrated at his father’s foolishness.

The fact that he actually had to explain such self-evident things struck him as terribly stupid. Still, it had to be said.

“It’s simple, Father. This is for m-”

He swallowed the word “my” the moment he thought of it. Sooner or later it would be true, but for now, it was not entirely his.

“—Our domain. It’s to protect our serfs. The Sorcerous Kingdom is overwhelmingly powerful. More so than the Kingdom. That being the case, it would hardly be strange if they attacked the Kingdom. This is a way out for when that time comes.”

“Cheh! What do you mean, way out? What do you think the surrounding lords will think when they hear about what you’ve done?!”

“They won’t come and attack us, not in this day and age.”

Many people within Philip’s domain had died because of that battle. The same applied to the surrounding estates. Therefore, they would not have the excess strength needed to attack Philip’s domain.

“Did you consider anything else?”

“Hah?” Philip replied. He had no idea what his father was getting at.

“That’s why I say your thinking is shallow. You’re acting as though your daydreams are already reality. This is—”

“—I think you should stop there for now,” interrupted the man who had been standing behind his father all this time.

He was the butler who had attended his father all this time. Philip disliked that man, who was the type that never let anyone see his feelings. He was one of the people Philip intended to chase out after he had solidified his position as the family heir.

His father worked to get his breathing under control once he heard the butler's words. The red in his face receded, leaving a pale, anemic face.

"...Haaah. Hah. Philip. I have a question for you. Are you not afraid of making enemies of the surrounding nobles?"

"They're nothing to be scared of, no?"

His father rounded his shoulders in disappointment. That response sparked frustration and unease within Philip.

Had he missed out something? Still, he could not think of what that might be.

"Many young men died in the battle of the Katze Plains. This will lead to all sorts of problems within the next few years. Therefore, the surrounding nobles will need to work closely together in a cooperative relationship. This domain will produce food, that domain will weave clothing. Nobody's estate is large enough to be self-sufficient, nor do we have much money left over. Under these circumstances, who will help a family that actively courts the Sorcerous Kingdom's favor?"

Cold sweat broke out on Philip's back. His father had a point.

"You know that too, right? Our demesne does not produce anything the others do not — we have no unique exports. Therefore, they will have no problem with kicking us out of their co-operative."

Philip racked his brains. He had a good head on his shoulders. He should be able to refute any number of his stupid father's assertions.

"That's why we have to rely on the Sorcerous Kingdom, Father."

His father bade him to continue.

“Once we build ties with the Sorcerous Kingdom, we’ll just have them support us.”

“...Then let me ask you something. If you were someone from the Sorcerous Kingdom — no, if you were the king of a certain country, and a village from a country that you were at war with asked you for food, would you give it to them?”

“Of course. If it was me, I would definitely do so.”

“—Why is that?”

“Isn’t that obvious? By doing so, I’ll show everyone that I’m a merciful ruler.”

“...Apart from that?”

“...Nothing else.”

His father’s jaw dropped. He must have been impressed. Still, that sort of reaction was quite strange. After all, the Sorcerer King would surely want to be known as a kind ruler, particularly since the Sorcerous Kingdom had been founded on E-Rantel and the area surrounding that city. He would surely make some concessions to quiet them.

“Is that so… so that’s what you were thinking. Well, if it were me, I would surely send aid as well, in order to create a *casus belli* to invade the other country. After that, I would declare war on the Kingdom, under the pretext of liberating that village which the Kingdom was oppressing.”

“Impossible. It’s fanciful thinking. Besides, that sort of cause won’t work at all.”

“Really now, and why do you think it’s impossible?”

“Let’s back up a bit here. Let’s assume it’s really as you say, father. Isn’t that more of a reason to deepen our relationship with the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

“You—”

His father was at a loss for words.

“Have you no pride at all as a nobleman of the Kingdom?”

“Of course I do. However, it would be better not to have it than be destroyed, no?”

“That’s the demon king who slew your brother and countless people of the Kingdom with frightening magic, no? This is the king you’re going to support.”

“That was war, father. What difference does it make if they died to swords or spells?”

“...Why is it that you have so much trust in the king of the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

That was not trust, though there was some goodwill there. More importantly, they were all just pawns for Philip to play in order to improve his lot in life.

A pawn! That’s right! To me, even the Sorcerer King of the Sorcerous Kingdom, who is feared by all the people of the Kingdom, is little more than a pawn in my hand!

Philip grew excited as he imagined himself playing a massive — on the scale of nations — game of chess.

Still, it’s only natural that father would be worried. That said, if I can rebutt him so easily, it just means that’s all there is to him… Although, it might be best to discuss the matter with Albedo-sama the next time we meet.

“I tire of this… Did you thank the Count for the dinner party? I’m asking about whether he acknowledged you as the new family head.”

That was the one thing Philip could not accept.

Even if he was the head of the faction, why did he have to bow his head to a count who was nothing more than an outsider?

It was the family head’s prerogative to decide who the next leader of the family would be. It had nothing to do with that Count. Now, perhaps if the count had backed him when his brother was around and he was still a third son, leading to him becoming the heir, he might have been grateful for that. However, that was not the case. Philip had achieved his current position entirely through his own luck.

In other words, there was no reason to bow and scrape to him.

Therefore, Philip had not gone before the Count to lower his head and offer his thanks. However, if he said that, his father would probably get agitated again. This was a lie for the sake of his father’s health.

“Of course.”

“I see. That’s good. Since you’ve done that, there ought to be a way. When the time comes, all you have to do is ask the Count for help.”

With that done with, just as Philip was beginning to feel at ease, the butler interrupted again from behind.

“—There is one more problem. The matter Philip-sama mentioned at the beginning has not yet been resolved. Philip-sama said he was inviting the emissary of the Sorcerous Kingdom to a ball organized by this family… What shall we do about that?”

“That’s right, Philip! What were you thinking? Our family doesn’t have a place to host a ball!”

All landlords had an estate in the Royal Capital.

There were small mansions set aside for their visits to the Capital.

Of course, they were not as tiny as commoners’ homes. They might only be used a handful of times a year, but they were also a sign of the nobility’s power. Therefore, they had to be large enough to accommodate the entourage the lords brought with them. However, they were not much larger than that, and the interior was not large enough for a ball.

Still, that problem had already been dealt with.

“It’s fine. It’s true that our estate cannot host such an event, but I’ve already managed to rent another place.”

“Ohh, could it be the Count?”

Philip shook his head at the faint flowering of joy on his father’s face.

“No, it’s a place belonging to someone I know in the Royal Capital. The landlady there said she could loan it to me. The fact was, I spoke with her before I came back, and she assured me that it would be fine.”

“And what will we have to pay for it?”

Philip sighed internally at the butler’s question.

So that’s the first thing he asks, huh.

“It’s free of charge.”

“Free of charge, you say? ...Is that even possible?”

“Yes.”

The words of the landlady came to Philip’s mind: “I have high hopes for your future, so I’ll invest in you. However, I hope you’ll return my kindness in the future.”

“I do not believe such good fortune would fall upon you just like that… Could you have been deceived?”

Anger blazed up within Philip, but he knew that his father trusted the butler implicitly, so he could not rebuke him just yet.

“I’ll owe a favor, but since I promised to return that favor, it will be fine.”

“...So that’s the venue taken care of, but how about the invitations? Shall we have the Count send them out?”

What is he saying, Philip thought. This event was being run by his family to raise their reputation. Why, after putting in all that hard work and preparation, did he have to hand over the most beneficial part of that to others?

So that's his slave mentality talking. How sad… I don't want to end up like him.

"It'll be fine. I've asked the landlady who lent me the venue to help me with the preparation work. Of course, I will decide the guest list."

"...Still, it would be quite rude not to let the Count vet them. It's not too late to ask the Count for help now. In addition, do you really know which families to invite which won't cause offense?"

"I do, to some extent, and I intend to invite some special people this time. The landlady has already given me their names."

"You…"

Doubt appeared in his father's eyes.

"...Have you been manipulated by that landlady's words?"

"Father! How can you say that? I came up with this and made it happen! It's true that I had to borrow some help to do it. But that landlady agreed that my plan had merits after she heard it — which means that she saw that my plan could succeed, and she felt that I could pay the appropriate price! What have you been thinking all this while? Under normal circumstances, you should be giving me your full support as the next head of the family!"

That much was true. The landlady had said, "I will gladly help you if you will allow several nobles close to me to take part." It was because both of them had a mutually beneficial relationship that he had gone to her for help. He was definitely not being manipulated.

She was completely different from that Count who controlled his father, stole all the gains away, and left him with nothing.

You're the one who's being controlled, Philip wanted to say.

"...Forgive me. But can you tell me the name of that landlady?"

Philip suppressed his anger. After all, he was talking to someone who had not yet shed his nature as a slave. He had to open up his heart and take all this in stride.

"Her name is Hilma Cygnaeus. Have you heard that name before?"

"No, I've never heard of her before. How about you?"

The butler shook his head. Philip was proud that he had managed to acquaint himself with someone that even his father, who had long immersed himself in noble society, did not know.

"I will get the landlady's opinion on the matter of the Count. It might be troublesome to bypass her and ask the Count for help instead. Is there anything else, father?"

His exhausted father had no response to this.

Though he was still a little unsatisfied, Philip began putting his plan into motion. The next step was sending an invitation to the emissary of the Sorcerous Kingdom, Miss Albedo, and then thinking about how to consolidate his position from there.

Part 4

A grand hall filled Philip's eyes, easily equal to that ballroom in the Royal Palace — no, it was even better than that.

He could not help but think of how to show this off to others. Granted, Hilma had arranged the preparations for this venue. However, she had asked him beforehand: "Should I arrange for a regular ballroom event, or an incomparable spectacle? The latter will require a heftier favor in return?" and Philip had chosen the latter without any hesitation.

In other words, this ball had been organized by the favor Philip had paid for — in other words, this was an event which corresponded to the effort he had put in. And then, there were the many nobles who had gathered here because of him.

It was perfect. However, it was because of this that Philip felt very unhappy about a certain detail.

He had decided the location on the invitation — though he had to rely on others' wisdom, the final decision had still been his — and the wax seal on the letters had belonged to his family. More importantly, everyone was here to meet the emissary of the Sorcerous Kingdom. And it was Philip who had invited that emissary here.

In other words, he was the host and the one who had worked to make this happen, so he was the one who should have been receiving words of praise and nods of gratitude. They should have been thanking Philip for inviting them to such an event. They should also have been praising his courage in inviting the emissary of the Sorcerous Kingdom, who nobody else had dared approach.

Instead, what was happening now?

The first person everyone spoke to once they came here was Hilma. Only after that did they come to greet him. In addition, they only did so reluctantly, after Hilma mentioned Philip's name. What would they have done if she had not brought it up?

Since he owed Hilma a favor, he had to bear with the fact that she was more noticeable than he was. However, all he felt toward those nobles was annoyance. Going by the basics of noble society, it should have been obvious who they should have been addressing first.

That's why you're all a useless lot. Cheh, it seems accepting Hilma's suggestion was a bad idea.

He had invited the nobles here by tapping on Hilma's intelligence.

The nobles he had chosen were newly elevated heads of their families thanks to the war with the Sorcerous Kingdom, or those who would soon become the heads of their families. In other words, these people were in similar situations to Philip.

The reason why he had accepted Hilma's suggestions was because there were not many people who thought like Philip did. If there had been no change in the family leadership, it was very likely that they would all only think ill of the Sorcerous Kingdom.

However—

Is there anyone here who isn't incompetent?

He looked over the guests who had just arrived, and then he walked toward Hilma.

What a cock-up, Philip thought.

Those idiots buried in their family trees were truly idiots. That was why they had messed up on the person to whom they should have first spoken to. Or rather, one could say there was no other reason for that.

...Still, isn't this a good thing? They won't be able to take leadership because they're idiots, right? If there was a noble here with a better brain than mine, I wouldn't be able to take command of the new faction that I intend to found, and regretfully, my family isn't that powerful either.

This might be a chance for him. Since this was their error, he would consider them to owe him one for not speaking to him first, and then he would collect on it in future.

Just as he was plotting eagerly, Hilma appeared before him.

She was a woman who was little more than a bag of skin and bones.

Her sickly thinness made her look like she had a severe illness. She would probably have been beautiful if she had more meat on her bones, but that was already a thing of the past.

“Philip-sama, it seems all the invited guests have arrived.”

“Is that so?”
In other words, they all saw him as number two here, Philip thought. He tried to conceal his feelings of inferiority, but Hilma seemed to have seen through him.

She cackled.

“You seem dissatisfied.”

“No, certainly not.”

Philip smiled. He was a nobleman — he could deal with such intrigues.

“There’s no need to lie. I am your supporter in this because I stand to gain from it, Philip-sama. We cannot have any secrets between us.”

Her words were tinged with flattery.

That was it.

Philip’s heart quivered.

This was the proper attitude a commoner should have toward a noble.

He was finally experiencing the situation he had long been looking forward to, and the unhappiness in his heart vanished like it had all been a lie.

“Is something the matter, Philip-sama?”

“No… well, come to think of it, I’m not upset, but I am uneasy.”

“What discomforts you? Is something lacking? If that is so, shall I prepare it before the emissary-dono arrives?”

“It’s not like that,” Philip said as he affected a cough. “I simply didn’t expect the people here to be so… unexceptional. Even if I gathered all these people into a faction, I wonder if they could compete with the other factions. That is what discomforts me.”

“I see, so that’s how it is.”

Hilma smiled.

She was too skinny to inspire lust. Even so, her charm was such that it made him gulp.

“But then, isn’t it because they’re this way that they will need your careful leadership, Philip-sama? I wish to call your attention to your domain — are the peasants there very intelligent?”

“No—”

“Which is why they need a wise leader, no?”

“Yes, indeed, that’s right.”

“If it’s you, Philip-sama, I’m sure you’ll be able to steer this faction well. I will also provide as much help as I can give.”

“Because you stand to gain from it, am I right?”

“But of course. I am helping you because I am certain that I will reap benefits from doing so.”

Hilma chuckled.

The anger in Philip’s heart was completely gone.

Everything Hilma said was correct.

Philip thanked his luck for being able to meet a woman like Hilma.

She had broad contacts, great wealth, and had access to a great many things which Philip could not obtain within the Royal Capital. Her explanation for why someone like her would want to curry favor with him was also quite reasonable. In addition, his terms of repayment were also very simple, which was why he felt at ease in making use of her.

“If you help me, I will make you wealthier than any other woman.”

Hilma’s eyes widened a little, and then she smiled happily.

“That would please me very much. I would be glad to be able to wear a necklace set with large gemstones like the noblewomen do. Then, please work hard, Philip-sama.”

“Ah, leave that to me… Then, may I ask another question of my supporter?”

“Yes, by all means.”

“...May I know why you are so slim? Does something about your body trouble you?”

It would be troublesome if she could no longer support him. If even the priests could not heal her, then he would have to find someone to replace her, or allow her to recommend a successor.

“Oh, it is not a problem worth mentioning, no.”

“I’ve heard that some heiresses diet to lose weight, is that the reason?”

Hilma smiled. This was the first time Philip had seen a smile which conveyed such unease without words.

“It’s not like that. The fact is, I can no longer eat solid food, so I can only consume drink, and I can’t take in too much either… yes. Please, do not worry. I will have someone use healing magic if it’s because of an illness.”

Her mood returned to normal, as though nothing had happened.

“I will definitely not die before I profit from our acquaintance, Philip-sama.”

“Oh, ohhh, really, then that’s good. However… why can’t you eat solid food?”

That had been nothing more than a throwaway statement, but it had a telling impact. It seemed as though all emotion had fled Hilma's face.

The change was greater than before, and it made Philip anxious.

"Is, is — something the matter?"

"Ah, ahhh, my apologies. I simply remembered some things."

Hilma covered her mouth as she said that, and she looked very pale.

"Ah— my apologies for making you remember something unpleasant."

What had she gone through to make her incapable of eating solid food? While she now enjoyed broad social connections and enough wealth to live in decadence, there must have been a time when she could not eat properly too. He wanted to probe further, but it would probably be a very bad idea to do so.

"Philip-sama, I believe it is about time to summon the emissary. I believe that if you were to be her escort, everyone would look at you with different eyes. That would prove you were the organizer more than any number of words — it would show who is the most powerful person here."

"Ohh! Indeed, that's right."

Because she had showed up alone at the Royal Family's dinner party, Philip had thought that sort of thing was normal. So it was not. It shamed him to know that was not the case, and he put on an act of having forgotten but just remembered.

"Everyone will surely be surprised. Many who did not come to speak to you will surely feel anxious and uneasy, Philip-sama."

A sadistic glee awoke in Philip's heart. Some of the nobles here were higher-placed than him and had larger domains than himself. What sort of expressions would they show him, he who had once been regarded as the burden of his family—

"That's right, it would be bad to keep her waiting. I'll head over."

“Then, I shall have one of my people show you the way there.”

Led by one of Hilma’s servants, Philip set forth toward the room of the Sorcerous Kingdom’s emissary, Albedo.

He knocked on the door, and then opened it.

What he saw behind that door was a woman whose beauty knew no equal.

She wore a jet-black dress, a different one from their encounter in the Royal Palace. Her bare shoulders gleamed like alabaster, and while her necklace consisted of large gemstones linked together, it did not seem tacky, but instead accentuated her beauty.

How beautiful...

Philip blushed in spite of himself.

“—Then, shall we?”

“Yes. Please permit me to be your escort.”

Philip took a hand that was sheathed in a black lace glove, and helped Albedo up.

A fragrance came from his side. *What kind of perfume is this, it makes my heart feels so light.* Although he subconsciously wanted to sniff at it, that would have been terribly rude.

While the two of them were already walking side by side toward the ballroom, proceeding in silence like this made the air seem heavy. Philip struggled to think of an appropriate topic to bring up, but by the time he had come up with something, they were already near their destination.

“There are many nobles in the ballroom. All of them have gathered to see you, Albedo-sama.”

It seemed a little rash, but it nevertheless received an immediate response.

“Is that really true? Thank you for your assistance, Philip-sama.”

Albedo smiled tenderly to him, and Philip’s heart pounded.

While this probably was not the case, could it be that she was starting to like him?

He was a man who would soon stand at the top of a great faction. In contrast, the Sorcerous Kingdom wielded overwhelming military power, but for now it was little more than a city-state.

When one thought of it that way, he was quite the catch himself.

Not to mention, he was unmarried too.

“Come to think of it, are you already wed, Albedo-sama?”

Albedo froze. He had seen her gentle smile several times already, but this was the first time he had seen that expression on her.

Philip felt shame creep up through him as he realised that he had asked an inappropriate question.

“What a strange thing to ask, Philip-sama. Regretfully, I do not yet have a partner in that capacity, and I am sadly single.”

“Is that so? Given your beauty, I would have expected the suitors to come thick and fast, Albedo-sama.”

“Fufu — it is quite a surprise that no such suitors have come my way. Still, such offers would be quite troubling for me, so it is hardly a bad thing, in my opinion.”

“Is that so...”

Before he reached the door, Philip placed his hand on Albedo’s fragrant shoulder, and made to slowly draw her over to him.

There was a strange *gichiri* sound. Philip looked to his right to see where it came from.

"Did something happen?"

His tiny doubts faded away as Albedo asked him that question with a smile on her face.

"No, it's nothing. Then, please allow me."

♦ ♦ ♦

What exactly did their eyes see?

How did this scene appear to these fancily-dressed nobles?

Hilma was interested in the answers to those questions.

First-class cuisine, first-class servants, first-class utensils, first-class music, and below third-rate trash nobles.

The people gathered here were largely good-for-nothing wastes of food, third sons and below who were the spares of spares. They had been forced to bow their heads to the world for various reasons and were filled with resentment.

The looks on their faces said everything.

Many of them expressed the carefree joy of liberation. Many others were consumed by the flames of desire. To these people, this place was one where they could fully indulge their vanity.

Then again, this place had always been intended to be a feeding ground.

Noble society in the Kingdom was now in a state of chaos.

It had been several months since the war with the Sorcerous Kingdom, but the scars it left behind were large and could not fully heal. Several factions had dissolved because of this and new ones had risen to take their place. The upper-class noble houses had been displaced by the those families which had previously been lower-ranking.

The current chaos in the Kingdom was an incredibly good chance for all those people who were unaligned to any of the factions. No, it might be their last chance. If the factions established themselves again, they might find themselves banished to the sidelines once more.

Because of that, this gathering was a gigantic feeding ground for them.

It was one where hungry fish would lure the small fry into their bellies.

In contrast, would the small fry be eaten without them ever noticing? Or would they realize something and skilfully disengage? Or perhaps — would there be nobles filled with desire who would turn their tables on their would-be devourers?

After studying this scene for nearly an hour, Hilma concluded that there were no nobles here which could be considered first-rate, the kind which she wanted to ensnare with all her might.

Even so, she was not disappointed by this outcome. Indeed, she would be worried if there were any first-rate nobles parading themselves in a dangerous place like this.

She had been quite careful when sending out her invitations, but Hilma did not think she was perfect. There would surely be someone from one of the factions in here.

Still, that would be interesting, she thought.

The more she had to say in her report, the more her own value would rise. This was not a bad thing at all for her.

Then, it's about time, no?

It had been an hour and a half since the ball started, so it was the appointed time.

Hilma’s real work was only beginning.

—It was frightening.

Her previous arrogance vanished as if it had been nothing more than a lie.

Perhaps a gentle term like “frightening” would not be able to encompass the sheer terror that welled up from her stomach. She thought of fleeing with all her might as she imagined the hell that awaited her if she displeased them.

Of course, if she actually did that, she would assuredly suffer a fate which would make that hell feel like blissful paradise.

As a member of the Eight Fingers, she had handed down many assassination orders to her underlings. She had also ordered people to be tormented before they were killed. But compared to what those monsters had done, her orders overflowed with the milk of human kindness.

“—Hilma.”

The voice from behind startled her, and her shoulders twitched.

When she turned around, she saw the stupidest man in this hall.

“Hm? Is something wrong?”

“No, Philip-sama, nothing is wrong.”

Hilma concealed her true emotions within her smile. Among those emotions was anger at being surprised by a piece of trash like him.

“Albedo-sama wanted to rest for about ten minutes, so I came to find you.”

“That is quite reasonable, given that she was speaking with all those guests. I understand; then, I shall accompany Albedo-sama to the break room.”

“Really? Then, I shall go too.”

What the hell is he talking about? That was the reply Hilma wanted to give. No, it might be that he had sensed something.

With caution in her heart, Hilma continued her act:

“I feel it would be better not to do so.”

“Why is that? I was by Albedo-sama’s side until just now. It shouldn’t be strange for us to go together, right?”

Now, Hilma was sure that this man had not suspected anything.

In other words, he was a moron amongst morons, a good-for-nothing with neither the knowledge nor the etiquette to be a nobleman.

“I fear that if a lady is accompanied to the rest area by a gentleman who is not her husband, it might lead to the spread of… inappropriate rumors for both parties.”

“Ahhh. However, my plan is to immediately return once I get there.”

“Even so, it is not quite appropriate. I understand your concern for her as the host of this event. However, I am also the provider of the venue, so please allow me to take on this responsibility and escort Albedo-sama safely to the rest area.”

“Ahh…”

It looked like he was going to say something else, so Hilma waited in silence for him to finish.

The truth was, she wanted to get this over with as soon as possible. Unfortunately, this imbecile was also the driving force behind this gathering. She could not be too rude towards him.

“What do you think I should do in order to join myself to her in matrimony?”

“Haaaah?!”

Hilma had completely forgotten to stay in character because of his words.

“Eh? Say what?”

“As in, a way to have Albedo-sama marry me.”

Seriously?!

Hilma desperately fought the urge to shout those words. She could hardly believe anyone could actually be this stupid. According to Hilma’s information, the person he was courting was the Sorcerer King’s right hand — in other words, someone who held a position equivalent to that of a prime minister. It was unthinkable for a low-class noble from a neighboring country to actually utter those words to someone like her.

Perhaps if he had asked to marry Princess Renner instead, Hilma might have been less shocked.

“Ahhh, but you see, I’m a man who managed to gather this many nobles too. I don’t think I’m that far behind her, what do you think?”

Without her realizing it, Hilma’s throat had contracted tightly.

Even though she knew those things would not be sliding down her throat, the unease and terror of the trauma she had suffered drove her to do so.

No, that was not a thing which could be summed up with the word “trauma”.

What if that person heard those foolish words, which held zero appeal to that woman? What would happen? It would be alright if only Philip had to bear those consequences. But if she was to be punished for it as well, that black hell might well be waiting for her.

“In, in any case, it’s hardly workable. I heard she holds a position equivalent to that of a prime minister in the Sorcerous Kingdom. That is to say, she would be a duchess in the Kingdom.”

“But isn’t the Sorcerous Kingdom a tiny marble of a city-state?”

“No, no, you can’t speak of it that way.”

Those words, which seemed to sneer at the Sorcerous Kingdom, made Hilma break out in goosebumps.

It was true that in terms of territory, the Sorcerous Kingdom was not large, even with the Katze Plains factored in. However, was their military power not overwhelmingly superior? Regardless of how much effort one put into trade, diplomacy and other fields, relationships between nations were still decided by their comparative military strengths. It did not matter how large a nation’s territory was, because once that nation lost, it would all be taken away.

If he did not even understand that fact, then how could she possibly explain it in a way that this twit could understand?

Hilma pondered deeply, but could not find an answer. After all, wisdom and stupidity were two sides of the same coin.

In the end, she had to reason it out for him.

“It cannot be done. There is no chance that woman would wed you, Philip-sama.”

“...But I thought the mood was pretty good. Didn’t the two of us look good together when we made our entrance?”

So that’s what he was thinking, Hilma thought in surprise.

Could it be that he was trying to get people on his side by acting like he had the Sorcerous Kingdom’s backing? This fellow is the ultimate moron… seriously, spare me, I’m begging you. Please don’t make that person angry.

Hilma felt something sour rising up from her stomach.

Yet, at the same time, she wanted to let this fellow feel what it was like to have something squirming into his stomach.

“...Perhaps I’ve said too much. Please allow me to escort Albedo-sama. You should stay here and enjoy yourself as the host, Philip-sama.”

“...Well, since it’s like that, it can’t be helped. I’ll leave Albedo-sama to you, then.”

I’d do that without you having to say it. Hilma lowered her head, keeping those words in her heart. Then, in order not to hear any more of that nitwit’s babblings, she made a beeline to Albedo’s side.

Albedo was speaking to a nobleman. Under normal circumstances, Hilma might have watched the mood and bade her time. However, dealing with that nincompoop had exhausted her, so she immediately cut in and addressed Albedo:

“Forgive me, Albedo-sama, it seems it is about time for you to have a rest.”

“Indeed… My apologies, do allow me a short break.”

Taking Albedo by the hand, Hilma led Albedo out of the ballroom.

“Fu~ ...Ahh, how disgusting.”

Hilma turned around as she heard the voice from behind her. If things were really that bad, what should she do?

As she turned around, she saw Albedo dabbing at her shoulder with a handkerchief.

Albedo’s eyes met Hilma’s.

“That disgusting man touched me. Only one man in this world is allowed to touch my body in a lustful way… Shit. That piece of brainless dogshit…”

Her words were accompanied by a gnashing of teeth. To think that her face, which typically bore a gentle smile, would actually display her displeasure so openly. Was that an indicator of how unhappy she really was?

Hilma hesitated. Should she speak to her? Or was this a prelude to her punishment?

“...What should I do? Say something.”

“Ah, y-yes…” Hilma replied as her heart filled with an incomparable terror. “I can understand how you feel, Albedo-sama.”

“Ara, if that’s the case… can you get rid of that creature and then prop up another human in his place?”

“If it is your wish, then I shall immediately prepare another puppet for your strings, Albedo-sama.”

Albedo opened her mouth, and then closed it. She repeated that action several times.

It was a very attractive suggestion, one which would make anyone hesitate.

That said, it did not matter what she chose. Only hell would await him. Still, whatever happened to that idiotic Philip, one could only say that he had asked for it.

“Hu… Never mind. He was just a regular nuisance. That person’s foolishness made quite an impression on the nobles at the royal dinner, so switching him out now would be a bit of a waste… Hm, it might be fun to follow up on that. But no, probably not.”

Hilma recalled the conversation from just now, the wild fantasies and ravings of the absolute madman who wanted to marry Albedo.

What would change if she told her that?

No, that was too scary. She could not possibly bring herself to tell Albedo. After all, she might get caught up in that as well.

“He did nothing, but believes that he’s the only special one. He has truly reached the ultimate level of incompetence.”

“Indeed. Soon I’ll be able to splatter him all over the ground. He must be punished for the crime of touching this body of mine, which belongs to Ainz-sama, with his filthy hands.”

They did not speak after that, nor did they meet anyone else. Hilma brought Albedo to a certain room.

Once she reached that room, Hilma nearly collapsed due to her legs going soft in relief. Handling that woman alone — a confidant of that demon king who could even subdue that Jaldabaoth — had drained an enormous amount of her stamina. However, not being able to remain standing was absolutely forbidden.

Hilma gathered up all her strength. In her heart, she resolved to sleep for a full day after all this was over.

“This way, please.”

After Hilma opened the door, the men seated on the chairs within rose as one. All of them were as skinny as Hilma. They were Hilma’s colleagues; the five branch leaders of Eight Fingers and their chairman, making a total of six people.

They were also the people she trusted most in this world. In the past, they had feuded over profits, but now they no longer thought that way. After learning about the link between Jaldabaoth and the Sorcerous Kingdom, their fates were now linked. They had no choice but to work like slaves until this country was consumed and they were liberated.

These close friends of hers lowered their heads deeply as they beheld the very incarnation of terror (Albedo). The fear they could not hide made itself visible in the trembling of their shoulders.

Hilma closed the door to the room, and Albedo took the highest-placed seat in the room. The men and Hilma did not sit down, but remained standing as they awaited their orders.

“Now then, an order for you lot. You are to transfer resources to the Sorcerous Kingdom.”

“Understood, I am eager to serve.”

The head of the Smuggling Division did not waste a moment in replying. How could he delay? Once they had been summoned like this, the only possible response to any order they were given was "Understood". There was nothing else they could do apart from that.

The Smuggling Division's leader had lost a lot of power in the traders' guild during Jaldabaoth's disturbance, when much of his resources had been stolen away. Even so, there were advantages to being in his position. This was because his dealings with the nobles that had taken part in the war against the Sorcerous Kingdom had been conducted entirely with cash. Or perhaps, it would be more accurate to say that his power was slowly returning now that the merchants — who had extended credit to the nobles — were now agonizing about repayment.

"I am not referring to that. All you need to do is conduct trade at an appropriate price. After that, you will use the money earned to import food in preparation for the upcoming famine in the Kingdom. Buy the rations which the Royal Army could not move out in time — no, start by trading in grain futures. After all, Ainz-sama has already begun large-scale food production."

The future which she spoke of would surely come to pass, given the massive drop in the kingdom's workforce.

"Understood. I shall mobilize the traders immediately."

"These are especially important. Make sure they're in the first shipment to come over."

The man carefully and graciously accepted the piece of paper that she had tossed out.
"Yes!"

"Then, what news is there about magic items?"

Another man seemed to jump into the air.

"My deepest apologies!"

He bent his waist and bowed so hard that he hit his head against the table, striking it with a startling amount of force.

“My subordinates are currently infiltrating the Magician’s Guild to conduct an in-depth investigation on them. If I can be allowed a little more time — no, if you are willing to accept an in-progress report, I can deliver one right now!”

“Never mind, then. Just speed your actions up. In addition… yes. Have you decided on your new colleagues yet? If so, we’ll need to bring them back for baptism.”

The colleagues in question were meant to fill the empty seats of the Eight Fingers as the new division heads.

As she recalled exactly what that baptism entailed, Hilma choked back the urge to vomit. Similar expressions to hers appeared on the faces of her friends, who were desperately trying to keep their facial nerves under control.

It was a fiendish rite which broke the will and completely erased any inkling of resistance within its subjects. If any of the people in this room were told they would have to undergo it again, there was no doubt that they would start bawling like children.

“I am very sorry, but we have not yet decided,” said the Chairman.

This was the truth, and it was also a lie.

The reason why he said so was because the divisions which the newcomers would head were now meaningless. The empty seats belonged to the chiefs of the Security and Slavery divisions. There was hardly any trade in the latter, so there was little benefit to having someone fill that position. As for the former position, the very need for its existence was in doubt. In addition—

“The gentlemen we were allowed to borrow have performed very well. It might not be out of the question to have them serve as division heads themselves.”

The gentlemen in question referred to the undead which had been lent to them, each of which possessed unbelievable power.

Once they realised that the Six Arms were dead, a group of subordinates — the leaders of whom had originally been Workers — began plotting a violent overthrow. As a result, they sent out one of those undead creatures. In the end, that entity had eliminated nearly 40 people without letting a single one escape.

There was another reason for doing so; quite a laughable one, in fact. That was because nobody here wanted anyone else to go through the same thing as them. These hardened masters of the underworld who could calmly order the death of a man did not want anyone else to taste the same despair they had. This was how they protected them.

"...I understand. It will be fine as long as the organization can function as normal. Then, do you have any particular requests for me?"

"I fear to ask, but we have discovered that the Skeletons have produced outstanding results in the mines I have acquired. If possible, we would like to hold on to them for a little longer."

"Hmm, of course. If you can pay the appropriate fee, there will be no problem."

"My deepest thanks."

The speaker's forehead began sweating profusely. He wiped at it with a handkerchief which was so wet it had changed color.

The frightening thing about the Sorcerous Kingdom was not simply the whip that it wielded, but the sweets which it offered.

They did not take everything away like the strong would do with the weak, but they conducted business like skilled traders and played by the rules. As long as they did not show any signs of betrayal, they might even feel the peace of mind that came from being protected by powerful beings. Of course, if the chance presented itself, they would still choose to flee in terror.

"Then, there's not much else for me to say in front of you. I believe I've mentioned this before, but do work your hardest to help the Sorcerous Kingdom swallow up the Kingdom in the future. In preparation for that day, you would do well to start making inroads at becoming legitimate businessmen."

"Understood!"

All of them nervously bowed to her.

None of them would possibly object to the Sorcerous Kingdom devouring the Kingdom. Since these monsters had made their declaration, it was only a matter of time before it surely came to pass.

At first, they had considered asking Blue Rose, Red Drop and Darkness for help. However, after hearing of the awesome power of the Sorcerer King, who counted Jaldabaoth as one of his minions, they realised that there was no hope. All they could do was lower their heads and wait for the end to come.

"Oh right, right—"

Hilma and all the other members shuddered.

"There's one more thing I wanted to say. There's a magic item that I want you to use your intelligence networks to locate for me. Record your findings on a parchment at regular intervals and send them to Albedo in the Sorcerous Kingdom. However, I don't know anything about its external appearance, so there is that."

"...What sort of magic item would that be?"

"It's a magic item that can control a target's mind."

"Mind control… a wand of charming or the like?"

"No, it feels like it should be something stronger. I'm looking for something not in general circulation, a legendary item, or at least news about it. You must let me know anything you find, however insignificant it might be. Do you understand?"

The mind control of which she spoke was a terrifying effect.

It was obvious why she would be wary of such an item, and so they immediately showed that they understood.

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"Pri-Pri-Princess-sama!"

The maid opened the door and barged in, clearly panicked.

She had not knocked, which was hardly an act that was worthy of praise, but instead implied something had happened which flustered her to the extent of not doing so.

Renner immediately saw through what was going on. However, in front of the maids, Renner was an innocent princess. Because of that, she put on a suitably clueless impression and asked in an equally air-headed voice:

"What's going on?"

The maid's eye twitched.

That tic had probably come from her anger within. Why was this princess so daft while she herself was so worried?

Renner lazily placed her cup on its saucer.

The sound of doing so seemed to jolt the maid back to reality, and she hastily sprang into action.

"A-a-about that—"

"It's okay, It'll be fine, Calm down, take a deep breath."

The maid did as Renner told, taking several deep breaths to regulate her panting. After regaining a measure of calmness, Renner asked, "What happened? Is it demons again?"

“N-no, that’s not it. The Sorcerous Kingdom’s emissary-sama says she wants to meet you, Renner-sama!”

“Is it a lady?”

“Yes, a very beautiful lady!”

Renner’s question should have been strange, because there was only one woman among the envoys from the Sorcerous Kingdom. If someone pressed the point, they might wonder what she was on about. However, the maid was currently confused, and answered in earnest.

Well, it’s fine, Renner thought. The more silly things she did, the more she built a reputation which she could use. It was all just setup, anyway.

Climb had been standing by her side. His armor clattered in response.

He must not have been able to follow what was going on.

His adorable actions, like an innocent puppy, filled Renner’s heart with a surge of tenderness.

There was probably no way he could figure out why the emissary was coming here to meet Renner. He had already seen her exchange greetings with Renner. That being the case, speaking with the Third Princess — who was little more than an ornament — would not bring any benefits to the Sorcerous Kingdom. At least, that was what Climb should be thinking.

Renner smiled warmly in her heart.

What they said about children being cuter the dumber they were was most assuredly true. Or rather, one could say that one loved them despite their shortcomings. Well, it was probably correct no matter how you looked at it.

If someone other than Climb had done this, other emotions would have come to the surface.

Although she was driven by the impulse to look into Climb's sparkling eyes forever, she had to bear with it for now. At least, until the moment she was enveloped by that delicious sugary candy.

"Why exactly would Albedo-sama want to meet me?"

Tilting her delicate little head was very important. Doing so would induce a negative reaction in the worried party. Its effectiveness had been proven after several experiments.

And sure enough, weak flames flickered in the maid's pupils.

They were flames of anger. At the same moment, Climb's armor clattered softly.

He must have sensed that maid's feelings and thought of something. But the sound soon stopped, and he returned to his upright and locked position.

How adorable.

He was like a puppy that was confused over whether or not to step forward, in order to protect his mistress.

That was because it would be better not to move if Renner had not noticed. The maid was the heiress of a good family, and no matter what Climb said, one word to her parents and Renner might be in trouble. Climb had probably thought of that.

He was probably crying inside, since he believed so much in Renner. If only he had a good upbringing, this sort of thing would not be happening.

Renner resisted the desire to turn to look at Climb, who was standing behind her. This was because the interfering maid opened her mouth to speak:

"I do not know the reason, only that she wanted to meet you."

"Is that so… Albedo-sama's a woman too, so maybe it's girl talk... is it about makeup?"

She asked that question in an innocent — or perhaps in a flat-out brainless way.

“I do not know about that either. Then, may I bring her in?”

“Of course you may!”

After her reply of feigned delight, Renner turned to look at Climb.

“Hmmm~ Climb, I’m sorry, but since this is a matter between ladies, could you step out of the room for a while?”

“Understood.”

It was kind of a shame, but that could not be helped either. Climb did not need to know about bothersome things. All he needed to do was look at her with those pretty eyes of his.

When Albedo entered the room, there was only one person inside.

Albedo had four objectives in coming to the Royal Capital.

The first was the transportation of resources. The second was to create a *casus belli*. The third was to lay the foundation for her personal objectives. The fourth was to make a trade with the owner of this room.

No, calling it a trade would not be entirely accurate. This was more of a reward.

Albedo strode across the room and took a seat without waiting for the owner of the room to give her permission.

Then, she looked to the girl who was genuflecting before her with her head lowered, and said:

“You may raise your head.”

“—Yes.”

The girl called Renner lifted her face.

“You have done an excellent job.”

“Thank you very much, Albedo-sama.”

“Ara~”

Albedo seemed quite interested in Renner’s reaction, which was completely unlike what she had shown thus far.

This was the Renner of whom Demiurge had spoken.

She had betrayed her family, her bloodline and her people, but there was not a shred of regret on her face. She was human, yet she was inhuman. Perhaps she was a spiritual heteromorph. Her mind comprehended good and evil, but that was all. She was the type who was not bound by the petty constraints of morality, but who calmly worked to advance her own agenda.

“...As a reward for your efforts, I have brought you a gift from Ainz-sama.”

Albedo reached into the air, and pulled out the item which her master had given her for safekeeping.

It was a box that bore several layers of seals. It was impossible to open without fulfilling specific conditions.

“This would be…”

As the girl accepted it with gratitude, Albedo watched her with a cold gaze, as though the girl was little more than a guinea pig.

Indeed, she was a guinea pig. But because of that, both sides shared the same goals.

“You have my deepest gratitude. Please convey my thanks to His Majesty, Ainz Ooal Gown-sama.”

“That I promise you. I trust I need not waste words on the other item you want?”

“Of course. I shall receive that boon once I have delivered the appropriate recompense. There is nothing more delightful than that.”

The girl smiled.

It was a very lovely smile.

That was why she asked:

“...Although opening that box can fulfil your wish, can you really open it?”

What would the others in Nazarick think if they saw Albedo showing concern over a human being? That said, if her wish really did come true, then this could be regarded as preparatory work for her elevation to a status equivalent to that of an Area Guardian. In that case, it was perfectly understandable to show concern over a candidate for a subordinate’s position.

“Yes, Albedo-sama. The preparations have already begun.”

“Really now. Then, make sure they’re finished before we invade.”

“Understood, exalted mistress.”

As the girl lowered her head again, a pair of eyes appeared in her shadow.

The Shadow Demon lurking within slithered forth and lowered its head along with the girl.

Albedo considered whether or not to lend her extra reinforcements, but in the end she decided not to mention it.

If the girl’s actions were exposed before the Sorcerous Kingdom invaded the Kingdom, that would mean there was no value in taking her into Nazarick.

In other words, all this was a test.

“Then, let us dispense with the formalities here.”

There seemed to be a change in Albedo’s tone, and there was a surprising expression on Renner’s face.

“Ending the meeting at this point would be too hasty. Is there anything — let’s chat, then. All right, sit. Can you tell me about your puppy?”

Albedo was greeted with a full-faced smile.

“I would love to, Albedo-sama. In addition, if I may, could you tell me about His Majesty as well?”

OVERLORD VOLUME 10

INTERMISSION

The innermost reaches of the Slaine Theocracy.

Very few people were allowed into this inviolable sanctum.

The first was the highest-ranked member of the Theocracy; the Pontifex Maximus.

Next were the Cardinals, the highest appointment holders of the six sects that were devoted to the Six Gods. Incidentally, each of them (aside from the one belonging to the same sect as the current Pontifex Maximus) was a potential candidate to be the next Pontifex Maximus.

The Cardinal of Fire -- Berenice Nagua Sandeni.

She was the sole female among them. She was over 50 years old, and a little plump, possibly due to her age. Her well-fed face bore a motherly smile which put all who looked upon it at ease.

The Cardinal of Water -- Ginedine Delan Gwerfe.

He was a shrivelled old man. He was so old that one could not tell his exact age, and his skin was a dusty brown. Although people worried about his health, none could exceed his intellect.

The Cardinal of Wind -- Dominic Ire Partouche.

He looked like a kindly old man, but he was originally of the Sunlight Scripture, and had exterminated many heteromorphic beings during his time as a holy warrior. His wrath was like a wildfire while his murderous intent was like chilling frost.

The Cardinal of Earth -- Raymond Zag Lauransan.

He was a keen-eyed man and the youngest of his present company. That said, he was still in his mid-40s, though his energy made that fact difficult to believe. He was a former member of the Black Scripture who had served for 15 years -- a hero who had defended his nation.

The Cardinal of Light -- Ivon Jasna Dracrowa.

His narrow eyes and skinny frame made him look like a sinister person, but that was definitely not the case. Everyone here knew the reason. As a user of divine magic, he ranked at or near the top of all the people present.

The Cardinal of Darkness -- Maximilian Oreio Lagier.

He was surrounded by countless books that hovered in the air, supported by improved versions of the [Floating Board] spell. He wore round glasses, and he had originally been a priest from the judiciary. Hence, many of the books levitating next to him pertained to the law.

In addition, there were the heads of the Judicial Branch, the Legislative Branch and the Executive Branch of the Theocracy's government. There was the head of the research institute which handled magical research. In addition, there was the Grand Marshal, the highest appointment-holder in the military.

These 12 people comprised the highest executive authority of the Slaine Theocracy.

After entering the room, they took up cleaning tools and began cleaning the room. Some of them got rid of dust with feather dusters. Some of them wiped with dry cloths, while other wiped with wet cloths. Someone used a magic item to vacuum up dust.

There was no wastefulness in their movements, and they cleaned the room with well-practiced movements.

Not a single one of these people -- who stood at the pinnacle of the Slaine Theocracy -- was slacking off. Sweat gushed from their foreheads, their beautiful and pristine robes were stained by dust, and none of them stopped in their efforts until the room was spotless.

The room had been quite clean before they started working on it. Now, it seemed to glow.

None of them thought to wipe off their sweat. Instead, they lined up in front of the six statues -- which appeared to be defending this room -- and lowered their heads.

“Today, we give thanks to the gods that human beings like ourselves are still alive.”

After the Pontifex Maximus said those words, everyone repeated them after him.

“Thus do we offer our thanks.”

They raised their deeply bowed heads and stored their cleaning equipment in the corner of the room. Then, they cast [Clean] spells, cleaning their clothes and their equipment, and the towels they used to wipe away their sweat smelled sweet.

It was a trivial matter to clean dirt and dust with a first-tier spell. Widening that spell would allow the entire room to be cleaned with ease. However, there was nobody among them who was sacrilegious enough to do so in this sacred room.

After cleaning themselves, they took their seats at the round table.

This included the Pontifex Maximus of the Slaine Theocracy.

At this table, everyone was equal. There were no superiors or inferiors here. Everyone was a collaborator and a comrade. Indeed, all this was for the glory of mankind.

“Then, let us begin the meeting.”

The organizer of this meeting was the Cardinal of Earth, Raymond Zag Lauransan.

“Our first topic is the seizure of the Kingdom’s Fortress City E-Rantel and its surrounding area as the heart of the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown, a fortnight ago.”

There was nothing that could possibly be any more important than the sudden advent of this mysterious nation.

However, far too few people knew the details of the situation. Most of what they knew was little more than hearsay.

For starters, they knew that the Sorcerer King was an undead creature, that he was an extremely powerful magic caster who had obliterated the Royal Army, that he controlled an army of the dead, that there was a Death Knight among those undead, and so on.

Raymond, who commanded the Six Scriptures, reported these details in his capacity as the meeting’s organizer.

Just then, someone spoke out:

“I knew we shouldn’t have let it happen, we should have intervened in that war!”

“...What are you saying? Open battle against a magic caster who controls a Death Knight is extremely dangerous. Didn’t we all agree on that earlier? You might have objected then, but don’t try to overturn our previous decision… Although, I didn’t think he would actually establish a nation.”

The group nodded one after the other.

“What does the Empire plan to do? They’re allies of the Sorcerous Kingdom and they’ve endorsed the founding of that nation, so does that mean they’re officially collaborators now? Or are they being controlled by magic?”

“I doubt it. Paradyne’s there.”

“Then, I guess we made a mistake in thinking that Emperor could be trusted.”

“...Well, a more important problem is the fact that he’s one of the few talented individuals who isn’t being properly utilized. Should we begin the plan to draw him to our side?”

“Then--”

After a brief clapping of hands, the debate which was about to heat up promptly cooled down.

“--Thousand Mile Astrologer was observing the battle between the Empire and the Kingdom. However, there’s been a slight problem, so the report was delayed. I beg your forgiveness.”

The problem in question probably referred to the fact that she had locked herself in her room and had been in there for quite some time. At least, that was what everyone thought.

“Then, we shall distribute the records of what she saw. These have not been verified by others; they’re just her account of what she saw of the Sorcerer King’s army at the battlefield.”

How troublesome, everyone thought, though they did not say it. They took the records and studied them.

They stopped after the last piece of paper. They went over the same part over and over again. They had the same stiff expressions and their faces slowly grew pale.

Raymond smiled to see the changes in their expressions. He had been through the same thing that was happening to them now, and he was glad because misery loved company.

And then, as though to represent everyone else, Maximilian shouted. His mouth opened so wide that his glasses fell off, but he did not seem to care about that.

“Impossible! How could anything like this possibly exist?!”

“I told you earlier, didn’t I? This is just a description of what she claimed to have seen.”

Maximilian shut up in the face of Raymond’s cold response.

He was panting like he had just been sprinting. As Maximilian struggled to get his breathing back under control, Berenice decided to ask another question, to see if someone shared her opinions.

“Can you say that again? Is this actually real?”

“If everyone here still believes the word of “Thousand Mile Astrologer”, then it is.”

With pained looks on their faces, they all looked back to the papers they were holding.

They had all stopped at the same place -- the composition of the Sorcerer King’s army.

“Hundreds of Death Knights (at least 200), hundreds of Soul Eaters (at least 300)... is it? If they went berserk, it won’t matter if it’s the Kingdom, the Empire, the City-State Alliance or the Holy Kingdom -- they’d all be destroyed!”

“...As would we. If these things swarmed us, we’d need centuries to recover from the damage.”

Death Knights. Difficulty estimated at 100 or higher. They were able to create Squire Zombies which could themselves make other Zombies. The Zombies themselves did not have much combat power, but they might lead to the spawning of stronger undead.

Soul Eaters. Difficulty estimated at 100 to 150. They were undead with point-blank area-of-effect abilities. They could consume the souls of the deceased for sustenance and grew stronger the more souls they ate. They radiated an aura of fear. Without at least a 3rd-tier magic caster, even facing them was impossible.

All of them were undead on a level that could destroy a city or a small country singlehandedly.

“Was she mistaken? Maybe the Sorcerer King noticed our surveillance and used illusions to confuse us.”

Ivon put that possibility forward as he stretched out his withered, branch-like arms.

“Oh”, the surrounding people murmured, but Raymond shattered that possibility.

“The Black Scripture knows of many monsters. While it is true she might not have the full picture of things, she -- Thousand Mile Astrologer -- was in charge of providing intelligence support to her team. There is no way she could have been mistaken. In addition, we have verified sightings of Death Knights and Soul Eaters in the capital of the Sorcerous Kingdom -- the former city of E-Rantel.”

That was answered by several defeated sighs.

All they could do was acknowledge the point in voices full of fatigue, and then they continued discussing the matter.

“What should we do? What is the best course of action for ourselves, as the protectors of mankind? What can we do about 500 monsters, each of which can destroy a nation by themselves?”

“So their forces are equivalent to 500 small countries… that’s insane, right? How badly could that country upset the balance between nations?”

“The question is, what does the Sorcerer King intend to do with that kind of military power? If he just intends to have them defend his territory, it won’t be a problem in the short term.”

“How could that be? It’s far too much just for defense. Also, isn’t the Sorcerer King one of the undead, who hate the living? I’m sure he’ll use his power to assault the neighboring countries.”

“It doesn’t matter how the Sorcerer King intends to use his military strength. What matters is what we can do about it.”

It was a valid opinion, and the direction of the meeting began to turn.

“Then… can the Black Scripture deal with it? That’s the most important thing.”

They were the Slaine Theocracy’s final ace in the hole, a special forces unit composed of heroes. One could think of them as adamantite-ranked adventurers, but there was a critical difference between the two, that of their equipment.

The gods had left divine equipment behind in this world, but adventurers would need to go on epic quests, the likes of which were the stuff of heroic sagas, all just to obtain a single piece of their panoply.

In contrast, each member of the Black Scripture possessed multiple articles of such gear.

If even they could not handle a threat like this, then they could still conduct a grand ritual to summon the highest-ranked angel to deal with the problem.

Surely the most exalted of angels would be able to triumph over Death Knights and Soul Eaters. However, the sheer number of foes made them very uneasy.

All eyes went to Raymond.

He chuckled. Some people smiled in response to his laughter, but those smiles froze on their faces as they heard what he said next:

“It’s impossible. I say this as a former 3rd Seat of the Black Scripture; anyone who expects us to face 500 of them must be an absolute madman. It would have been bad enough even if they were only present in equal numbers. No, if not for this, why would Thousand Mile Astrologer have locked herself up in despair? However…”

The nature of his smile changed.

"It's different for the God-kin."

"Ohh," went the sounds of rejoicing.

"The two of them should be able to deal with an army of Death Knights and Soul Eaters. Of course, just in case, we still need to give them the best backup we can."

"So it'll be fine with those two."

"Well, that's a relief."

Amidst this jubilation, only Ginedine went "hmph". Sensing the weighty air of fatigue around him, everyone quietened down.

"...You're not telling us everything, are you?"

"Ginedine, what are you getting at?"

"The law does not prohibit false testimony and obscuring the truth in this place, but we are colleagues serving under the same flag and lying is a grave offense. If you agree with this, let me ask you one more time: What are you hiding?"

"Ginedine. What's wrong with you? Why are you saying this?"

"Dominic, I have a question. Why did Thousand Mile Astrologer lock herself away?"

Knowing that nobody could answer that question, he continued to speak.

"She did so out of despair. Or perhaps she must have suffered some sort of shock. It's true that an army of the dead is frightening. However, she's a member of the Black Scripture. Do you really think she would go into hiding just because of that? ... It's because she saw something that even the God-kin could not beat. This report isn't complete, is it?"

Everyone looked at Raymond and Ginedine.

“..What are you trying to achieve by hiding that point? I trust you. I know you’re not the sort of man who would use the Scriptures for his own gain. But why are you not revealing this?”

“Well done. As expected of you, Ginedine. I simply wanted to explore the possibilities… then, I’ll say it. Agonizing over this problem alone would simply give me an ulcer, so I’d be glad to share it with all you gentlemen here.”

Raymond looked at his seated audience.

“How much do you know of the battle between the Kingdom and the Empire -- no, between the Kingdom and the Sorcerous Kingdom?”

The person who answered on their behalf was the Pontifex Maximus.

“I heard that the Sorcerer King used a powerful spell. As a result, the Royal Army routed and was defeated. Because of that, they abided by the requests made before the battle and ceded E-Rantel to the Sorcerous Kingdom for the founding of a nation. That’s all.”

“And the number of deaths?”

The Pontifex Maximus simply shook his head at Raymond.

“I don’t know. That news has not reached me yet. It should be the same for the rest of you, right?”

“Yes. Priests and traders don’t go to E-Rantel now that it has become the heart of the Sorcerous Kingdom, with an undead king. So all we hear are rumors of unknown provenance.”

“So we need the Scriptures -- this sort of thing is better suited to the Clearwater Scripture than the Windflower Scripture, right?”

“Yes, which is why only the commander of the Six Scriptures -- namely, you -- knows the truth. All we learned is what little leaked out.”

“...I see. Then, release the full, unabridged version of what Thousand Mile Astrologer saw during that battle to us.”

After reading the rest of the report, the room filled with the silence of despair.

Feeling that this could not be allowed to go on, Ivon raised a question:

“I see, I see. ...You were afraid our hearts would stop if we saw this first, right?”

“Not really. Your hearts are strong enough to sprout hair. I was simply afraid that if I opened with this, none of you would believe it.”

Ivon nodded, unable to refute that.

“It’s true that we would have doubted this if we had seen this first. We would not have believed it at all. But after understanding the reality of the Sorcerer King’s army, we have no choice but to believe.”

“Still… I don’t want to believe this. With just one spell, he killed over half of the Royal Army. During this battle, the Kingdom mobilized 260’000 men. Half of that would be at least 130’000 people, right? I heard the Royal Army was defeated, but this…”

“Only she saw it, right? It’s not uncommon for death tolls and casualty counts to be exaggerated…”

“Even so, the description of wiping out an entire wing of the Royal Army with one spell means over 80’000 deaths. And then there’s the hideous monsters summoned from those sacrifices…”

“I can’t deny what she’s seen any more. This is magic of the gods. 11th tier magic, I believe? That should be it.”

“The advent of the gods.”

“What’s written here is similar to the description of that god… is it possible He has descended from the heavens once more?”

“Impossible. The oral traditions state that the God of Death, Surshana-sama, was slain by the damnable Eight Greed Kings.This must be something else.

And if Surshana-sama had actually descended once more, that person would surely have told us. After all, that person is Surshana-sama's first follower."

"Then, it's come at last?'

"Probably, yes. After 200 years."

"It should be correct, judging by the oral traditions. It might appear somewhere on the continent."

"Their national power increased so slowly because those piles of trash messed up so much of the plan."

"Those idiots in the Kingdom…"

Everyone had looks of hatred in their eyes as they heard those words.

The Kingdom was the most geographically secure country of all. Because of that, the Slaine Theocracy had assisted them in the hopes that the Kingdom would become the nation which would save mankind. By breeding large quantities of humans on safe and fertile land, many talented individuals would also appear, who could be groomed into heroes that could resist non-human invasions. However, peace and prosperity caused them to fall into degeneracy, and the Kingdom rotted from within.

What was more troubling was how they produced narcotics and exported them to the other promising country, the Empire.

Thus, the Theocracy had changed their plan.

Their backup plan was to allow the Empire to devour the Kingdom, and then educate the talented individuals within the Empire.

The reason why the Theocracy did not conquer the Kingdom themselves was because they would then become neighbors with the Republic, which might lead to a dangerous movement within the people to destroy the Republic.

The basic tenet of the Theocracy was that humanity was chosen by the gods, and all other races had to be exterminated.

Thus, they inculcated an attitude in the people that they were surrounded by enemies and that they had no choice but to work together. This was the only way they could focus their national power and become a strong country. However, if they became neighbors with the Republic, there was a chance that their philosophy might lead them in a dangerous direction.

Everyone here understood that they could only plan the future of the Slaine Theocracy by knowing the strength of their country, those of the other countries, and which matters to prioritize. However, the common folk would shout for war with the Republic in order to destroy the enemies of mankind.

That would be disastrous.

The Republic was very strong.

To be precise, the danger lay with one of the councillors of the Republic, the Platinum Dragon Lord, child of the Dragon Emperor. If they did battle with him, the mightiest of the Dragon Lords, they ran the risk of their country being reduced to scorched earth. But what of the people who did not know that? What would they think? They would see enemies to destroy, yet all they could do was bite their nails and wait.

Of course, everyone here could easily quash such resentment through force, but that would produce backlashes that would weaken their national power. In addition, they could not deny that a war might break out in the future.

Thus, the Theocracy could not share a border with the Republic, nor could they directly control the Kingdom. Even if they wanted to rule it from the shadows, the Kingdom was too large.

“Let’s consider the Sorcerer King first. To begin with, he should have been the one who destroyed the Sunlight Scripture, some time back.”

The air seemed to crackle and freeze.

“A magic caster with that name appeared in a nearby village with that name at almost the same time. I don’t think we’re mistaken, are we?”

“What about the Vampire that the Black Scripture encountered? A minion of the Sorcerer King?”

“It’s very possible, but I think it’s more likely that it was a being on the same level as the Sorcerer King, just like those people. Otherwise there’s no way to explain that power.”

“Indeed, so since we’re on the topic of multiple appearances, Jaldabaoth ought to be such a being, right? That would explain the power he wielded in the Kingdom, as well as the reason for a monster with that sort of power appearing all of a sudden.”

“Then how about Momon? He seems to have been chasing that Vampire, but if that prediction is correct, he should be a similar entity to the Sorcerer King. That would also explain why he was as strong as Jaldabaoth. The question is whether or not he’s an ally of the Sorcerer King…”

“Momon slew the Vampire and stood against Jaldabaoth. Given that they might be the same manner of creature yet opposing each other, it’s possible that they might still have been enemies then? After that, he negotiated a truce with the Sorcerer King and became his ally.”

“Then there’s only the question of why he killed the Vampire and opposed the Sorcerer King. Perhaps he killed it because it was controlled by the Supreme Treasure. Still, why would he oppose Jaldabaoth? ...If Momon was a comrade of the Sorcerer King, in what sort of scenario would he be Jaldabaoth’s enemy?”

“...Perhaps the Vampire and Jaldabaoth were working together, while the Sorcerer King and Momon were allied. Or there might be one where the Vampire, Jaldabaoth, the Sorcerer King and Momon were all enemies. There are also other possibilities. But there’s too little information to tell.”

“The worst-case scenario is all four of them being on the same side, but the likelihood of that is very low. Momon is too humble. Normally, someone with that much strength would flash it around much more. Yes, just like the Eight Greed Kings. Or perhaps, like our Gods.”

“I see. So the reason why he did not do that was because he was on the lookout for others. No, perhaps he was being watchful for others on the same level as him.”

“Then, since the Sorcerer King has taken the stage and begun building his nation, someone will be taking action to make up for the difference in fighting power. If Momon’s words are to be trusted, Honyopenyoko has a companion. We have to watch out for it, as well as Jaldabaoth.”

“This is all just conjecture at the moment. We just need to think about making contact with the Sorcerer King or Momon.”

“It’s too risky. It’s far too risky. We should instead go to the Empire and gain information from the people there, and then make contact with the Emperor.”

“That would be good, as long as the Emperor doesn’t wag his tail for the Sorcerer-King, that is.”

“It’s a gamble, but it can’t be helped. If we do nothing but cower in a corner, we’ll end up having to play catch-up with others.”

“Still, when you say a gamble… how much of a gamble? If we mess it up, it’ll become a *casus belli* to attack us, no? We should try to understand the Emperor’s stance on the matter before making contact.”

As everyone agreed on that proposal, someone else asked a reasonable question.

“...Still, have there been no revolts in E-Rantel, that city ruled by the undead? Have they all been killed? Or is there a perfect reign of terror in place?”

After hearing that question, hardly anyone could believe Raymond’s answer.

“According to our reports, it seems to be ruled in peace.”

Hah?! That sound did not fit these people at all, but it could not be helped that they made it.

“Hmhm. At my age, I do end up hearing things that aren’t there, but it seems my condition has suddenly worsened. Raymond, what was that about peace?”

“It looks like the sun’s going to come up from the north tomorrow. ”

“...All right, enough with jokes. If Raymond is telling the truth, that would be a truly unimaginable sight. Is our informant a madman or a satirist?”

“The report states that the Death Knights are used as city guards, Elder Liches as public servants while Soul Eaters are used to pull cargo wagons.”

Everyone’s jaws dropped besides Raymond’s.

“Nonono, wait a minute. What? Could you say that again?”

In the face of Maximilian and his missing glasses, Raymond’s did not change his words as he repeated himself.

Haaah?! Once more, that same unfitting sound escaped them.

Each of them was an undead creature of jaw-dropping power. But now, that knight of the underworld maintained public order like a good little soldier, that lord of the labyrinth sat at a desk managing the flow of goods, and a monster that could slaughter an entire city did the job of a horse and its groom.

And such a country existed right on the other side of their borders.

“What the hell. What pit of hell did that come from?”

Undead were strolling about on the streets and managing the city. All they could imagine was that all the humans there were dead.

“No. The former residents of E-Rantel -- the current citizens of the Sorcerous Kingdom are living ordinary lives there. There was some confusion at first, but it is peaceful now.

“...It seems we have all been underestimating the Kingdom all this while.”

“Umu… how strong are their spirits?”

Just imagining the act of walking beside an undead creature which hated the living made everyone present shiver in fear.

That would be like living next to a starving monster. It would be normal for a regular person to be afraid.

“They’re probably putting up with it because they trust that great warrior, the heroic adventurer Momon the Black.”

Raymond related an account of what happened on the first day of the Sorcerer King’s rule over E-Rantel.

They all listened intently.

“As I thought. It’s impossible for Momon to have been the Sorcerer King’s companion.”

“Ara, isn’t that further proof of Momon and the Sorcerer King being in cahoots? They did show up at practically the same time, right?”

Mmm… Everyone held their heads in contemplation.

They felt that the chance of that was not insignificant, but there was honestly no way to tell.

“Is there a way to set Momon against the Sorcerer King? Perhaps if we used the people of E-Rantel, we could--”

“That’s dangerous, far too dangerous. If it goes poorly, we’ll make an enemy of Momon and the Sorcerer King at the same time.”

“You’re right. As it is, we’ve taken considerable losses. Though the dead have been revived, the Black Scripture will still be short on manpower, while the Sunlight Scripture is effectively dissolved. The Crown’s been stolen, the Miko Princess and Kaire are dead. It’ll take us at least 10 years to recover our strength. We can’t go around roasting meat next to a sleeping Dragon in this state.”

“Yes. We need to avoid opening up two fronts at the same time.”

At this moment, the hostility in the room seemed to swell.

“Those filthy traitors.”

“Those bastard elves.”

The Theocracy was currently at war with the Elves of the Great Southern Forest. Originally, the Theocracy and the elves had a cooperative relationship. But that relationship had been broken, and the Theocracy was now fighting the Elves with their own power.

They had built a forward base at Crescent Lake, seat of the Elven Capital. According to the plan, the Capital should have been destroyed in a few years, but that plan was slowly going off-script.

“How about a ceasefire with them for now?”

“Don’t be foolish. How much blood do you think has been spilled in the fighting up till now? Firstly, how can we not take revenge for that person?”

“That child--”

After saying this, the old man smiled bitterly.

He treated her as a child because of her appearance, but the fact was that she was older than anyone in this room.

“--How is she?”

“In the same room nearby, as always.”

“Umu, we need to give her a chance to avenge her mother.”

“Yes, otherwise it would be far too unfortunate. Her heart should probably be at ease after taking her revenge.”

Pained looks appeared on the faces of everyone present.

“..Frankly speaking, I take offense with the priests of the time. They raised a poor little girl with that sort of personality.”

“Well, if you want to say that, you might as well blame the barbarians of the forest. The Cardinals didn’t think it was good to snatch her away from her mother’s side.”

“...What a troublesome topic.”

“Still, if we deploy that girl, that Dragon Lord might respond in kind.”

“The power of the gods, Downfall of Castle and Country, will probably not work on that fellow who can use wild magic, unlike with the Catastrophe Dragon Lord. How about using it on the Sorcerer King?”

Silence descended over the meeting room. It was a proposal that they were thinking, but could not speak.

“...It’s not a bad idea, but the fact that we don’t know what sort of power the Sorcerer King’s subordinates possess makes me uneasy.”

“...If only it could charm without limit, there would be no problems.”

“How dare you! The gods gave their lives to protect us, humanity! And to think you would be dissatisfied with the secret treasures they left behind? The audacity!”

After the rebuke, the old man bowed his head deeply.

“I misspoke.”

“Watch your tongue!”

“Then, back to the topic. We are all against using Downfall of Castle and Country on the Sorcerer King?”

“It’s too dangerous.”

“If the Catastrophe Dragon Lord appears, we could control it and use it as a vanguard…”

There was no point in hoping for what was not there.

“It can’t be helped. Should we send a messenger to talk with that Dragon Lord about the Elves?”

“Who knows what they’ll ask for?”

“Let’s just accept if the request isn’t too unreasonable. After all, it’s for the peace of that girl’s soul.”

There were no objections. Everyone here was deep in introspection.

“Fufu--”

A quiet chuckle rang out, and everyone’s eyes went to the person who made the sound.

“Fufu. Now that the people who knew the situation back then are all dead… well, you lot are quite a compassionate bunch.”

Those words might have felt insulting, but the tone was otherwise.

“...Our aim is to defend all of humanity from the other races, and all of humanity includes that girl. I think we can be forgiven for a little abuse of our offices if it’s to save a comrade.”

“..I have no reason to object if this does not result in any deaths.”

As he heard this , the Grand Marshal smiled bitterly.

“It would be better to directly distribute this knowledge rather than going by oral transmission, no? It’s all right if we’re going up against someone distinctive, but it’ll be dangerous if the other guy has gone to ground. Spreading that knowledge will also make it easier to gather information.”

This was a suggestion which had been made fairly often over the centuries. Naturally, it had been rejected each time.

“Our world is as fragile as a little boat which has been tossed into the ocean. The fewer people who know about it, the better. After all, there might be a typhoon every 100 years or so. Do you think people could sleep easily if they knew that? The fact is, the powerful cannot hide in the shadows for long. They will be very obvious, even if they try to live a normal life.”

“If that’s the case, what do you think that former Cardinal-dono will do?”

They all had complicated expressions on their faces.

“I’m not quite sure, but there’s a very high chance of movement… Perhaps there’s some kind of trump card in store.”

“Or maybe the former 9th Seat, Windstride, might know something...”

“How worrying. Is she close to us? Nothing is more troublesome than that…”

There were several sighs in the room.

“What about asking the retired members of the Black Scripture for help? That way we can restore our fighting strength, no, maintain our vigilance. We can send them to the Draconic Kingdom as reinforcements. The chances of them dying are very low.”

The Black Scripture was commonly assigned to very dangerous tasks, and so they had a very high attrition rate. However, as long as the corpses remained, they could be brought back to life. The problem was that resurrections drained a person’s lifeforce, and one would need to train for a long time to recover the strength they had before death. Thus, some people chose to retire instead.

There were also others who had retired due to their age, but no matter the reason, any retirees had priority on whatever post they wanted. While there were those who were content to live a degenerate, jobless lifestyle, there were very few of those. Most of them would not be able to bear the repeated looks from their wives and questions like “Daaaad, why haven’t you found a job yet--?” and thus they returned to work.

It would take a while to refamiliarize these people with the feel of actual combat, and there were those older ones who could not perform as they had in their prime due to age. Still, they were more reliable than most others.

“Just explain the situation to them and make our request. Don’t expect everyone to take up arms, though.”

“Of course. It would take a real bastard to put pressure on people who completed missions in the most dangerous places and then retired.”

“Yes. Just ask them. But if anyone agrees, pay them more than they expected.”

“If only they paid us at all.”

Self-deprecating chuckles echoed through the room.

Complaining about a lack of wages was a private joke for them.

In the Theocracy, salaries fell off after one rose past a certain rank. This was a form of self-purification, in order to ensure that people would not be motivated to rise through the ranks by greed. Thus, many of those who took high office did so because they were moved to serve their nation.

After the laughter stopped, the Pontifex Maximus spoke again:

“Then, everyone, let’s begin the next topic. Raymond, go ahead.”

OVERLORD VOLUME 10

CHAPTER 3

THE BAHARUTH EMPIRE

Part 1

Albedo was to leave for the Kingdom on a clear, sunny day, and Ainz came to see her off at the courtyard of his residence.

There were five luxurious coaches parked there. One of them was for Albedo and another was for her luggage. One of the remaining coaches contained gifts to the King, to impress upon them the difference between the might of the Kingdom and the Sorcerous Kingdom. Surrounding these carriages were 20 Death Cavaliers which Ainz had created.

It would have been simple enough to just teleport to the Kingdom, but they had not chosen to do so.

Albedo and her party were responsible for demonstrating the Sorcerous Kingdom's power. Part of that was using monsters in place of horses to pull their coaches; an implied threat, so to speak.

"Then, Ainz-sama, please take care of yourself for a while."

"Umu, be careful. We haven't found the people who brainwashed Shalltear yet. Thus we cannot rule out the possibility that they might seek to control you, and then use you as part of a great gamble to inflict massive damage on Nazarick."

"Of course. I will be careful and never let this leave my person."

Albedo was hugging a World-Class Item to her breast.

“I believe possessing that should eliminate the risk of being brainwashed by a World-Class Item. However, the opposition might not be limited to just that item. In addition, while that is the most powerful World-Class Item against physical objects, don’t forget that it is not very useful against individual targets.”

“Is that so? My main weapon is the transformed version of this…”

“It’s weaker than a specialized divine-class item. Even so, it’s still quite strong in that it will never be destroyed or damaged. All I want to say is, don’t be careless because you’re strong. Although I don’t think you’ll make a mistake like that…”

Come to think of it, Albedo had never been outside until now.

He had stationed her in Nazarick and had her serve as a rear guard. Because of this, Ainz felt worried, as though he was letting a child go out on an errand by themselves for the first time.

“Remain alert and do not be careless. If you feel there is danger, retreat immediately. Do you have any teleportation items? Some of them need time to take effect, so does yours work immediately? Some enemies can also impede teleportation before attacking, have you thought of a way to deal with them? There might also be enemies who distract you with bait before ambushing you. Don’t be fooled by your enemies’ strength, alright? Although I’ve heard you’ve gone through combat training in order to improve your flexibility, you still need to study up a bit more. In addition—”

He thought, *it would have been good if I had lectured Shalltear like this* while he thought about the tactics he would use for PKing. As he did so, he sprayed Albedo with a stream of words at machine-gun speed.

How long had he spent on thinking up all kinds of attacks? Ainz only returned to normal after he realised Albedo was looking at him with a delighted expression on her face.

This was terribly embarrassing.

Ainz coughed.

“Well, something like that. I believe that you of all people, Albedo, will not slack off on preparations and countermeasures. I’m sorry for delaying you. Take care when you travel.”

“Understood, Ainz-sama.”

“Although it might not be appropriate to ask right before you go, about Demiurge — no, never mind.”

“He should be fine, I believe?”

If he had received some communication from Demiurge, he would not have a huge pile of questions to ask him. For instance, Albedo had not opposed the formation of the Adventurer’s Guild, but it might be better to ask him in person when he returned. Albedo seemed surprised, but after she realised that Ainz did not intend to reply, she resumed her usual gentle expression.

“Then, Ainz-sama. As the Guardian Overseer, I will show you results which will not bring shame upon the office.”

“Your actions have never insulted your station.”

Granted, right after that he recalled Albedo mounting him cowgirl-style, but that was not the sort of thing one could bring up at this juncture.

“There is one more thing I have to say. While you are immune to disease, this world might possess illnesses that can bypass even that immunity, so be careful. I’ve heard that it’s exceptionally easy to fall ill at the turn of the season.”

The transition between the four seasons was not very clear in Suzuki Satoru’s world.

A thought struck him — what would Blue Planet do if he were here? He would probably have the same sparkly-eyed expression that Albedo did. ...Although, whether he could actually make that expression was a different matter entirely.

Then, Albedo volunteered a suggestion, with a look on her face like a freshly-bloomed flower:

“Ainz-sama! I, I know of a remedy that works very well against illness!”

“Hoh...?”

That was quite a surprise. He had not expected her to know of medication which was unique to this world.

Nfirea the herbalist should not have come into contact with Albedo. That being the case, could it have come from knowledge within YGGDRASIL, or perhaps something Tabula Smaragdina programmed into her? His curiosity now aroused, Ainz looked forward to what she would say next.

“A kiss!”

“...A kiss?”

“Yes, kissing relieves stress and activates the parasympathetic nervous system. Once the efficiency of the parasympathetic nervous system increases, the performance of the immune system improves with it. In other words, if you get kissed, you won’t get sick!”

“What you’ve said sounds kind of familiar…”

He recalled someone mentioning something about the parasympathetic nervous system while he was playing YGGDRASIL. That must be it. However, he did not feel that it would be effective in this world too.

“Therefore, I want a kiss~”

Albedo closed her eyes and puckered her lips.

All he could see now was an octopus.

That description might sound like it was slandering a great beauty, but the truth was, her looks had not been greatly diminished. After all, a beautiful woman remained beautiful no matter what expression she had on her face.

That untimely thought flashed through Anz's mind.

Ainz had considered running away at this point.

He wanted to say, “Certainly not”, but it was plainly obvious that she was hoping for a kiss. In addition, this was a wish from someone who was about to run a work errand, so he wanted to help fulfil it, to a certain extent. In addition, it would make his heart ache to ignore the wishes of Tabula Smaragdina’s daughter.

Ainz took Albedo’s chin in one hand, and planted a kiss on her cheek. That said, Ainz had no skin, and thus no lips, so the kiss Ainz gave was little more than pressing his front teeth against her. In addition, since he had no saliva, all she should have been able to feel was something dry and hard poking her.

Although this was terribly embarrassing, he had to inflict himself on her.

I’m glad I brushed my teeth, even though I didn’t eat anything.

After his hand left her chin, he met Albedo’s wide-eyed gaze.

“What, what’s wrong? Besides, it would have been too much to kiss you on the lips, so the cheek will have to do. Was it not right?!”

“...I did not think you would have considered it at all.”

Before Ainz could ask her about what she really meant, tears welled up in the corner of Albedo’s eyes.

“Fueeeen~”

Albedo wept. Those were not crocodile tears. She was truly crying.

After the long-awaited shock of his emotional suppression washed over him, Ainz hurriedly scrambled to do something. That said, he had no idea how to proceed.

In the past, when he had made Albedo cry in the Treasury, he had thought of something comforting to say. However, nothing came to mind now that Ainz had made her cry after kissing her. What would that pretty boy Emperor (Jircniv) do at a time like this? Although he thought about that topic, it would seem that none of the scenes which Ainz witnessed had ever covered a situation like that.

“Albedo, please don’t cry.”

He desperately wanted to look to the duty maid behind him for help, but he had already embarrassed himself badly enough. He could not disgrace himself even further.

“Albedo, don’t cry.”

Ainz pulled Albedo into his embrace and gently patted her back.

They stayed like this for a while, and then Albedo sniffled. It would seem her tears had stopped.

Ainz released the hands holding Albedo, as relief washed through him.

“Are you alright, Albedo?”

“Yes, Ainz-sama. I am very sorry for letting you see that shameful side of me.”

Though stained with tears, hers was still a very beautiful smile.

There was only one reason she could be crying.

His nonexistent stomach began aching after he realized how cruel he had been. At that time, he thought it was fine, because the game was going to end soon. If only he had not thought that way, she would not have cried like this.

“Is that so. ...Well, it’s about time. You should set out if you’re fine.”

“Understood, Momonga-sama!”

♦ ♦ ♦

The curtains mounted in the coach windows opened, and through them, he saw Albedo waving to him. In response, Ainz waved back to her.

This was a scene straight out of those railway train farewells one might have seen on television.

The coach stirred slowly into motion, and the sentries began moving as well.

Ainz watched until he could no longer see Albedo’s coach, and as he stared into the distance, he issued a somber, grave command.

“Forget everything that happened here.”

“Understood.”

Ainz walked past the maid, whose head was lowered. Ainz had no way of seeing what the kind of look she had on her face.

Part 2

The Bloody Emperor, Jircniv Rune Farlord El-Nix clutched at his head.

This was not a recent thing. He had been doing this for quite some time now.

In the past, he had purged all manner of nobles, heard about treachery which could shake the Empire, and learned of deteriorating relationships with neighboring countries. Through it all, this man had neither panicked nor fallen into confusion. However, in the face of an insoluble problem, even this man could do nothing but bitterly cradle his head.

“Dammit! You son of a bitch! Die! Die and rot away!”

While magic could curse someone to death, Jircniv did not have that kind of power. Therefore, he was simply speaking offensive words. If he could actually kill that hateful man who had wrought such devastation on his mind and his stomach lining for the past few months, he would gladly seek out such techniques.

“No, wait. It would be better to tell him to “live”, right? Or maybe, ‘be destroyed’ would be more appropriate? I’ve heard of some priests destroying the undead with sacred power.”

He was even thinking about such meaningless things.

Jircniv’s stomach ached and strands of his fallen hair adorned his pillow every morning. The culprit, the man responsible for all of this was the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown.

There was no satisfactory solution to the problems posed by the Sorcerer King.

The first problem concerned the casualties among the Imperial Knight Corps at the Battle of the Katze Plains.

There were only 143 deaths; a trivial number, for a direct clash with the enemy. However, the losses at the Katze Plain had been entirely self-inflicted.

In addition, 3,788 people had expressed their desire to leave the Knight Corps upon their return to the Imperial Capital. In other words, over 6% of the 60,000 men of the Imperial Knight Corps had lost their courage.

And then, there were thousands of people who complained of uneasiness and night terrors. According to the reports, there were at least 200 mentally unstable people as well.

Knights were professional warriors, and training even a single one of them entailed considerable expense.

Nor was it just a matter of money. Training time was also essential. One could not simply grab somebody off the streets and say, “From tomorrow onwards, you are a knight.”

The Empire would need to spend a great deal to fill the shortfall in the number of knights. But where would he get the funds for those expenditures?

At this critical moment, it was too risky to purge the nobles and seize their assets to make up the required amount.

The reason for that was because of the second problem — namely, the petitions which the Imperial Knights themselves had submitted to Jircniv.

The Knight Corps were permitted to make proposals to Emperor Jircniv. This was because there were some things which only blooded veterans could understand, and it was also to reduce the conflicts between military officers and bureaucratic officials. At the same time, it was also to give the impression that Jircniv — who had a martial background — was especially fond of the Knight Corps.

Of course, one could not expect such letters to always be positive, but the recent petitions were harsh indeed.

These petitions, from the upper echelons of the Knight Corps’ command structure, expressed their desire to avoid warfare with the Sorcerous Kingdom.

Jircniv could understand that sort of thing even if they did not bring it up.

Anyone who dared face that Kingdom in open combat would be far beyond a mere fool; he would be an absolute madman. That was a nation that could trample 200,000 enemy troops with a single spell. There was no way Jircniv would conceivably pick a fight with such a foe.

Even so, the reason why the Knight Corps had tendered such a petition was because they had lost their faith in Jircniv.

Before the Battle of the Katze Plains, Jircniv had proposed to the Sorcerer King: "I hope you will use your strongest spell". The upper echelons of the Knight Corps knew this, and laid the blame for that miserable hellscape squarely at the feet of Jircniv.

In other words, they were using him as a scapegoat.

When Jircniv learned this he was both furious and frustrated in the extreme.

If he had known that such magic existed, he would never have said such a thing.

Besides, the reason why Jircniv had asked that damnable Sorcerer King to use his strongest spell was to verify how powerful his magic was.

Originally, it should have been the other way around. "Thank you for drawing out part of the Sorcerer King's power. Now we know better than to act recklessly around him," they should have said while expressing their gratitude. After all, if things had gone poorly, that magic might have been unleashed in a city.

However, the Knight Corps did not see things that way. It was because they felt that Jircniv was a splendid Emperor that they believed he had asked for the use of that magic, knowing full well what it did. Thus, many suspicious gazes now fell upon Jircniv.

This was the first time Jircniv had been so disgusted by his own reputation.

However, crying and complaining would not help things. If someone could do something in his place, Jircniv would gladly cry and scream and rest until his stomach pains went away. Of course, nobody could do Jircniv's job for him, so he had to handle it himself.

"Damn that Sorcerer King! It's all his fault!"

He pressed against the pain that radiated from his stomach, no — Jircniv paused to think.

This was not "the Sorcerer King's fault". This was "the Sorcerer King's conspiracy."

It was very possible that the state of the Empire might have been orchestrated by him. When he calmed down and considered it, the possibility of that was very high.

Jircniv took out a key and opened a drawer. He withdrew a bottle from within.

Then, he pressed the silver ring he wore on his left hand against it.

The Ring of Unicorn — an item which could detect poisons and which enhanced resistance to poison and disease, which could also heal wounds once a day. After confirming that there was no reaction, he gulped it down.

Jircniv placed the bottle on his desk, and frowned.

He took a mouthful of water from a bottle on the desk, to wash away the now-familiar astringent taste spreading through his mouth. After that, Jircniv pressed the area around his belly again.

Was it just a placebo effect, or had his wound really been healed? While there was no way he could know for sure, at least his stomach pains had subsided for now.

"Haaah~"

After that abnormally heavy sigh, as though ponderous tasks awaited him, he continued his work. First, he had to start with that accumulated pile of documents.

A quiet knocking rang through the room, as though it were waiting for his hand to reach out.

The man who entered was a scribe. All of Jircniv's hand-picked scribes were excellent workers. However, this man was easily the equal of Roune.

Incidentally, there were no women among the scribes. The only woman who Jircniv trusted to handle this sort of work was one of his concubines.

"Your Majesty—"

Jircniv waved to cut short a greeting that might take a very long time.

"—No need for that, spare me the greetings. Don't waste time, get to the point."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Those traders from that nation have finally replied to us. They seem to have very good stock with them, and they will be visiting the Imperial Capital soon."

"Really now!"

Jircniv smiled at this, the best news he had heard in the past few weeks.

The nation in question was the Slaine Theocracy. Needless to say, the trader in question was an emissary from them.

While this room was warded against spying, after witnessing that spell from the Sorcerer King, he had come to believe that all these countermeasures were little more than stage dressing. The fact was, he had come to feel that someone was spying on him of late.

Still, no matter how many people he sent to investigate, they found no observers. The only conclusion they could reach was that this was a paranoid delusion on Jircniv's part. Granted, his nerves had been wound up quite tightly of late, so it might actually be the case. However, he could not get rid of the sense of foreboding that came from being watched.

In the past, he might have let Fluder set up anti-spying measures, but he could not do that now. For all he knew, Fluder might already have betrayed him. Therefore, Jircniv had to operate under the assumption that spies had already infiltrated the Imperial Capital.

Therefore, all policies concerning important matters needed their own codewords. Of course, there were a few small problems which cropped up at a result, but it was still better than letting the alliance against Ainz Ooal Gown be exposed.

“Then, when will it be?”

“I believe they intend to arrive within the next few days.”

Normally speaking, he would have openly invited them to the Imperial Capital, but that would be far too obvious.

It’s best to meet them while pretending that it was a coincidence. However, what sort of location would avoid suspicion?

He was out of options, but even if that were the case, he could not give up like this was just a regular game. Casting that spell of utmost cruelty was essentially telling Jircniv, “I am undead, so slaying the living is only natural.” He could not possibly ignore a being like that.

It was the duty of the Emperor of the Baharuth Empire to improve his chances of victory, even if it was only by a little.

In order to achieve that aim, one of the measures he had taken was to forge a secret alliance with the Slaine Theocracy. The Theocracy was a country with a longer history than the Empire, and it also counted divine magic as one of the pillars of their nation. There was no doubt that it was the best nation one could appeal to for ways to deal with the undead.

However, it would be very bad if the Sorcerous Kingdom learned of his contact with the Theocracy.

The Empire was now an ally of the Sorcerous Kingdom, and one which had helped guarantee its sovereignty. The reason why the Empire had done this was to understand the strength and organization of the Sorcerous Kingdom, as well as everything else within it. If it was discovered that they were working against the Sorcerous Kingdom, the Empire would undoubtedly be the first target for the might of the Sorcerer King.

"Permission to speak, Your Majesty."

Jircniv raised his chin, indicating that the man should continue.

"Is the act of opening hostilities with the Sorcerous Kingdom not a most foolish course of action?"

Jircniv glared at the scribe. *You too, huh.* He chucked a scroll case into a specially designated trash bin as he thought that.

Don't crush my flagging heart, please… However…

"Then, what would you suggest we do instead?"

"Well, about that…"

Jircniv smiled as he watched the scribe gulp audibly.

"Relax. I will not censure you for anything you say. Come, speak your mind."

"Yes, then, I apologize beforehand for any offense I might cause."

With a cough, the secretary shared his thoughts:

"I believe we should continue strengthening our bond of alliance, and if the Sorcerous Kingdom has any requests… we should give in to them."

The scribe's face was still pale despite Jircniv's guarantee.

Within his heart, that treasonous statement warred with the fear that his very life might be extinguished.

Jircniv once again smiled bitterly.

“You’re right.”

“—Hah?”

It was because he knew the man’s caliber that he felt that his gaping mouth was quite comical. Jircniv smiled in a different way than before, and then continued speaking:

“I feel what you are saying is correct. In your position, I might well make the same proposal. No, it would be strange if any man I appointed as a scribe did not suggest such a thing.”

Simply put, the Sorcerous Kingdom was far too powerful.

Though they could only judge from a military standpoint, it was clear that the Sorcerous Kingdom was on a level that they could not even hope to deal with.

The personal power of the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown alone was already far too risky to face. Then there was the army of the dead he had brought to the battlefield, each of which was rumored to be able to level a nation by themselves.

They were in completely different dimensions. When one thought about it, the very idea was laughable.

“Although I feel that is the best choice, does that mean we should not prepare to take some other action? For instance, if the Sorcerer King intends to destroy the Kingdom, do you think bending the knee to him will suffice to spare us?”

He had not yet heard of any massacres in E-Rantel.

Could it be that the undead were not there? After trying to gather some information, he discovered that the undead openly occupied the city, turning E-Rantel into a demon city.

It might be that he intended to rule the residents of the area without slaughtering them, but that was jumping to conclusions. After all, there was the news of how he had subdued that adamantite-ranked adventurer (Momon), so just from that point alone, it was dangerous to think that the Sorcerer King's tender mercies would extend to the Empire.

"It is as you say. It would seem I was so cowed by the Sorcerer King's overwhelming power that I could not even make such a rational decision. My deepest apologies."

"No need to apologize. After all, the thought came to mind in the past… back to the point, where have the traders of that country chosen to rest?"

"It seems they will be lodging in the largest of the second of four."

The second of four referred to a shrine of the God of Fire. The word "largest" was not code, so it probably referred to the largest shrine in the Kingdom — the Central Temple.

From this point on, Jircniv began nonchalantly chatting about random issues, with some lies sprinkled into the mix.

Sometimes, he would casually speak of made-up things. Even if anyone heard, investigating the truth of those words would be a tedious process. For the time being, he might have to continue this brain-straining work. As he thought about this, he realised they had been talking for several minutes.

Jircniv then decided to get to the main issue.

"How is your family? Are they still well?"

"Hah? Ah, yes. They're very well."

"Is that so? That's great. Good health is the most important thing, after all. I won't lie; the truth is, my body's been doing quite poorly of late. Medicine only keeps it at bay for a while. Do you think I should bring a priest over?"

“It seems the temples are not too happy with Your Majesty’s recent actions. Applying pressure might result in a backlash. Why not visit in person, Your Majesty?”

“What a wonderful idea.”

The temples battled the undead. Thus, to the priests, the founding of a nearby country which was ruled by a powerful undead being was something about which they were very wary. Thus, they had sent many requests to meet with Jircniv.

However, Jircniv had refused each time.

Jircniv was now in a state where he would take any help he could get, but he had his reasons for not accepting. One of them was because he did not trust their ability to keep out spies. The other was because Jircniv feared that if he told them what he knew, they might do something unpredictable.

If both sides reached an accord, and the priests then decided to declare war on the powerful Sorcerer King “because he is undead,” the consequences hardly needed to be stated. It would result in the Empire being caught up in their suicidal actions.

In short, Jircniv was afraid that once he made contact with the temples, the Sorcerer King would assume that the Empire was hostile toward him.

Jircniv sighed deeply.

Although he had hoped they would wait for the right moment, it would seem they did not understand that point, However, the Theocracy’s diplomatic party had covertly reached the Imperial Capital. Perhaps if he waited for them to make contact with the temples, there might be a chance to turn it all around.

“Then, I should make some time in the next few days to visit the temples and let them take a look at my body.”

“That seems like a wise course of action. Then, I shall go make the arrangements now.”

“Thank you. Then, what shall we do about the arena? I remember there was an exhibition match scheduled soon; shall we let it go on as planned? I’m not going to be stopped by words like ‘you said you were going for a checkup, so you can’t go there’, you know. If any of you wants to watch the fight with me, you may join me in my VIP room.”

The scribe’s eyes widened, and his eyes gleamed as he tried to divine the true meaning of that statement.

Yes, that’s right. You’d be right to suspect me. Come, see what I really mean.

Jircniv wanted to avoid meeting the people of the Theocracy in the temples.

The temples contained knowledge on healing and various other kinds of wisdom. If they were chosen as targets for a pre-emptive strike, far too many things would be lost, at a time where this accumulated knowledge was more important than anything else.

“Understood. Then let me handle the arena. I believe you were scheduled to visit the war wounded at the hospital on that day as well?”

Jircniv had not received this news, so this was probably a bluff.

In other words, he was suggesting to Jircniv that the hospital might be a better location than the arena.

Jircniv had chosen the arena because he had heard that it often hired priests to heal the wounded. With that in mind, he was thinking of bringing the emissaries from the Slaine Theocracy over in the guise of those priests.

“Delay the visitations. We’ll follow the schedule we agreed on earlier.”

With that, all talk about the traders had disappeared halfway through the conversation. If there were any eavesdroppers, what would they think of this? What could they learn from the phrase “second of four”?

However fiendish the Sorcerer King's intellect, he could not make any plans without any information to work with. In addition, not all of the Sorcerer

King's subordinates could be as intelligent as he was. Also, the more spies there were, the higher the chances they would be exposed. Since no information on those spies had been found yet, there probably were not many spies. Or rather, he hoped that was the case.

The spectre of the Sorcerer King's absolute and undeniable magic haunted his mind. Part of him constantly thought "Since they're the Sorcerer King's men, they must be exceptional too." Indeed, he had seen many incredibly powerful beings arrayed before that throne, so that implied that those spies might be of the same caliber as them.

If that's really the case, then we don't have a chance at all… if swearing vassalage to him will settle things, then wouldn't that be the best course of action?

He had just drunk a healing potion, but Jircniv felt a spike of pain in his stomach again.

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Two weeks later, a coach with Jircniv on board left for the arena.

On the surface, he seemed to be going to the Arena to watch a fight, but in truth, he was there to enter into an agreement with emissaries of the Slaine Theocracy and high-ranking priests of the Empire.

He had not brought any of his imperial guardsmen with him to avoid standing out, but two of the Empire's Four Knights — "Lightning Bolt" and "Violent Gale" — were on the vehicle as Jircniv's guards.

If possible, he would have liked to use all of these outstanding warriors to protect him. However, "Heavy Explosion" was not reliable, so he had left her behind under the pretext of guarding the Imperial Capital. No, saying that she was unreliable was not exactly correct. To be precise, he could already tell from her actions that she wanted to move on to the Sorcerous Kingdom. Thus, in order to avoid leaking any information to her which she could offer to the Sorcerous Kingdom as a gift, Jircniv had decided to keep a distance from her.

She had originally said, “I will do anything to lift this curse, even point this sword at Your Majesty”. Jircniv understood this, but had still decided to make use of her. Therefore, he could not rebuke her even if she decided to betray the Empire. However, he still could not allow her to take away information that was critical to the Empire.

That said, if she really had managed to eavesdrop on the Empire’s state secrets, then he would need to have her arrested. However, she was one of the strongest people in the Empire, so he would need to send out people on her level to eliminate her. In terms of swordsmanship, only “Lightning Bolt” and “Violent Gale” were up to the task. Sending anyone else would only result in a one-sided slaughter for them. In addition, suppressing her with numbers meant that the Imperial Capital and the Emperor’s security details would be thinned out.

That being the case, he would have to turn to Fluder’s disciples, workers, or perhaps assassins as represented by Ijaniya, all of whom possessed skills outside of melee combat. However, no matter which option he chose, he would have to be prepared to pay dearly for it.

The disciples were paid on a yearly basis — although ever since Fluder’s betrayal, he had confiscated Fluder’s land and made them nobles — so there would not be too many additional expenses there. However, dispatching them would require them to stop their work, which would incur losses invisible to the naked eye. In addition, if they were actually killed instead, the damage done would be more than what the latter two would cost.

Therefore the best option was to deny “Heavy Explosion” the chance to obtain valuable information and let her go empty-handed to the Sorcerous Kingdom. That might well be the most satisfactory solution for everyone concerned.

Jircniv had hinted as much to “Heavy Explosion”.

However, “Heavy Explosion” was still in the Imperial Capital. Her response was along the lines of “I shall remain until I repay the kindness that Your Majesty has shown me”.

He wanted to take that at face value, but that was impossible.

“Heavy Explosion” might be one of the Empire’s Four Knights, but the Sorcerous Kingdom would most likely rate her fighting power very poorly. Each and every one of the many undead directly loyal to the Sorcerer King were stronger than her. Because of that, she was looking for a way to raise her value in their eyes.

Jircniv’s stomach began aching again as he thought about the hopeless reality that the Sorcerer King commanded a thousand undead who were individually stronger than “Heavy Explosion”, one of the mightiest warriors of the Kingdom — and that was not including the Sorcerer King himself.

What should I do about this?!

A single strong person cannot change the course of a battle, they said. Yet, reality said otherwise.

The Kingdom’s Gazef Stronoff was a man who could do just that. It was even more true of the Empire’s head magician, Fluder Paradyne, a being who could shake an entire nation.

Each of them was a figure comparable to an army, or a country.

In other words, even without considering the frightening power of its undead king, the Sorcerous Kingdom already wielded the might of a thousand armies.

There’s nothing to be done, is there? If… well, you couldn’t stop him even with a thousand armies, right? ...As I thought, giving up is better...

Of course, he could not actually say that in front of his subordinates, but the idea had appeared in Jircniv’s mind several times already. In fact, it had been his first thought once he heard about the Battle of Katze Plains.

“—Then, Your Majesty. After we meet with Silver Canary, we’ll move out. Will that be alright?”

Jircniv shifted his gaze to regard the man seated before him.

Before him was one of the Four Knights, “Lightning Bolt” Baziwood Peshmel.

Jircniv nodded in silence.

They had hired a team of adamantite-ranked adventurers as security for today. While they were ostensibly there as a security detail, their main objective was to seek out any spies from the Sorcerous Kingdom. Regretfully, he could not meet up with Ijaniya, which had been considered as one of the alternatives. This also made Jircniv realise that inducting them into the Empire would be very difficult.

“Your Majesty, although adamantite-ranked adventurers possess the highest fighting strength of all humanity, they still cannot step beyond the bounds of human ability. Please do not lower your guard.”

Jircniv was painfully aware of those words which “Violent Gale” Nimble Arc Dale Anoch was trying to tell him. In fact, having seen the serried ranks of monsters within that throne room, he understood those words better than Nimble, who had watched that grand massacre with his own eyes.

“Of course. However, they might well be able to hold out. Consider the Kingdom’s adamantite-ranked adventurer, Momon. He pointed his sword at the Sorcerer King and defended the people with his strength. Since the members of Silver Canary are adamantite-ranked adventurers as well, it’ll be quite troubling if they can’t do the same.”

As he said this, Jircniv smiled sadly.

“And if even they… if even they can’t do it, what then?”

Jircniv’s question brought pained expressions to the faces of both knights. That look was a better answer than anything they could have said. Unconsciously, Jircniv began mirroring their expressions.

“Your Majesty, please do not make that face. We might not be strong, but we will still devote our hearts and souls to completing our task.”

“That’s right, Your Majesty. Please, adopt that confident, swaggering attitude of yours again. This fragile state you’re in now doesn’t suit you.”

Their gentle words pierced Jircniv's heart, and he could not bring himself to say, "doesn't that apply to you as well?" Yet, he decided to accept them without complaint. Those words might have had as much effect as scattering water on the desert, but it was true that they had soaked into the desert of his heart.

"..Forgive me. Thank you for your sincerity. Then… since only the two of you are here, would you mind listening to my foolishness for a while?"

The two knights nodded wordlessly.

"What do you think I should do? Why would a monster like that appear next to the Empire? Why? What sin did I commit against heaven and earth to warrant that? What should I do to slay that monster — or failing that, to seal it away? Now that the Empire's trump card has been stolen away by the enemy, is there really any way to turn the situation around?"

He had not planned to say that much.

If Jircniv did not stand at their head, his people would not be able to follow him. One who placed himself above others needed to adopt an appropriately superior attitude. This was especially true for the Bloody Emperor, who had purged many nobles.

The Emperor could not afford to show weakness. That was a lesson which his respected father had taught him.

However, all humans had a limit to what they could take.

The human side of Jircniv was one he would only show to his concubines. Now, that part of him was shouting.

"It's true I asked him to cast us a spell. But that couldn't be helped! We can't plan any countermeasures if we have no idea of his abilities! Am I at fault for that? Must I take responsibility for everything that went wrong? Everyone seems to think so!"

Jircniv bit his lip and clutched at his hair.

The truth was, this was merely the tip of the iceberg. If Jircniv had completely given himself over to the feelings in his heart, he would probably be crying and screaming and rolling around on the floor. He was simply trying to protect the image of the Emperor.

Still, he had some sense of self-awareness about how he was letting himself go.

It would seem this was becoming a habit, so Jircniv returned himself to normal.

“Forgive me. It seems I got a little excited. I’ve been under a lot of stress recently.”

He glanced down, and saw strands of hair on his fingers.

Judging from the portraits, none of his ancestors had thin hair. Jircniv could not help but muse that he might be the first Emperor in the history of the Empire to go bald.

He waved his hand to keep his subordinates from noticing. Sometimes pity hurt more than a rebuke, and the same applied to the matter of hair loss.

“That said, it might not be very convincing after you’ve seen that side of me. However, the two of you need not worry. I’ll take care of it, somehow. I won’t let him do what he wants to the Empire.”

That confident smile of his seemed to soften the faces of his subordinates.

However, none of them was truly at ease.

They too understood that Jircniv’s words were just temporary relief.

No matter how they thought, they could not come up with any way to deal with that monster.

In truth, Jircniv felt it would be impossible unless there was a weapon which could permanently slay the undead, or unless another very powerful human being showed up.

That's why we need to rely on the Slaine Theocracy. Their history is longer than ours, so they might be able to find a weapon that can slay the undead in one blow. No, just sharing information with them will allow us to keep fighting!"

All he could do now was pray that this was the case.

The coach continued forward, and with it rode Jircniv's last hopes.

♦ ♦ ♦

The arena was circular in shape. There was a large entrance at one of its sides through which the coach entered. This entrance led to the VIP rooms, and very few people made use of this entrance. The other entrances were used for the entry and exit of the regular patrons or for the transportation of cargo. These were the three main types of entrances to the arena.

The first to alight from the coach were, naturally, the two knights serving as bodyguards. After they had verified the safety of the location, Jircniv dismounted from the coach.
Five men waited for them there.

Their manner of dress looked entirely out of place for the VIP entrance.

Jircniv could evaluate the worth of any particular work of art with a glance, but he could not divine such information from their gear and equipment. This was because what they were wearing was both artwork and wargear. Theirs was not the outfit of a noble's house guards, but the panoply of battle-hardened veterans.

By the normal rules of etiquette, the inferior party should have introduced themselves first. However, some adventurers did not care about status or rank, and these were such adventurers.

Still, he was the ruler of the Empire. Was it really appropriate for him to be lowering his head to adventurers?

Amidst this awkwardness, the man standing in the center of the group of five spoke up:

“Your Majesty, Emperor Jircniv Rune Farlord El-Nix. I believe this is the first time we have met, and it is an honor. We are the adamantite-ranked adventurer team Silver Canary, who have accepted the request of providing security services. I am the team leader, Freivartz. Pleased to meet you.”

His dignified voice echoed through the surroundings.

He had a lute on his back and a rapier at his waist. He wore a chain shirt which wreathed his body in bizarre lights.

All his equipment did not just reflect the light, but emitted magical radiance from within. Every piece of his panoply looked like it was a first-rate magic item, especially that lute, which was also known as Star Symphony.

As he observed the man’s thoroughly confident attitude, Jircniv recalled himself from several months back, and could not help but feel some envy.

“... I have heard about the deeds of you gentlemen, the highest-level adventurer team in my country. That heroic saga of how you slew the Radiant Crawler truly got my blood boiling. Therefore, I know about all of you to some extent. However, since this is a rare opportunity, could I trouble you to personally introduce the heroes of my country to me?”

“Then, allow me, as the bard to…”

“—C’mon chief, lay off a bit, will ya? Hate ta say it, but when I hear ya go at it, I break out in bumps. Shiny shortsword or whatnot… anyway, can we just skip that part? Ayy, Yer Majesty. Sorry ‘bout the way I talk, I was born this way. No worries, yeah?”

The man beside Freivartz stepped forward and gently inclined his head.

He was a stocky and short man. Though he had a smile on his face, those disproportionately small eyes of his had no mirth in them.

He was Keila No Seydeshtin, a man with thief classes known as the “Planner”.

(TL Note: “Planner” here is used in the same way as “Assassin”)

There was not much information about the “Planner”, so there was much which remained unknown about him. He was probably closer to the underworld and more involved in ambushes and assassination than regular thieves.

Jircniv indicated that he should not worry about it, and then Baziwood chuckled.

“Haha, it’s fine. His Majesty’s long used to it.”

“Oh, and this would be… you must be “Lightning Bolt”-san of the Empire’s Four Knights. Could it be you were born there as well, friend?”

“Hm? Ahh, no, probably in a different place. I popped out in a dirty little alley. You must have crawled out of a deeper and darker place than me.”

“Seems that way. The air around you’s different… sorry ‘bout that. Guess I was too hasty.”

“It’s fine, “Dark Cloud”.”

“I’ve never called myself “Dark Cloud” before… really, this is all your fault, chief.”

Freivartz simply quirked up the corners of his mouth as Kaila looked to him.

“It’s better to let us introduce ourselves rather than go by strange nicknames. My apologies, Your Majesty. First, this is Seyde, our eyes and ears. Next is our fighter. You might be a bit surprised when you see him, but I can guarantee his strength.”

“No, of course His Majesty won’t doubt him. After all, I feel he might be stronger than me.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear that from a strong man. This is Fan Rong.”

The person being introduced was a red-furred ape which stood around 170cm tall. He was wearing armor that looked like it was made of white furs, and he had battle axes on either side of his waist.

He was an Ape Beastman, as well as one who channelled the spirit of the apes through the power of his warrior class, the Beast Lord. He had read about this in a report before, but actually seeing it with his own eyes was quite the shock.

And indeed, by appearances alone, he looked stronger than even Baziwood, the mightiest of Jircniv's subordinates.

Fan Rong raised his right hand and waved to Jircniv and the others.

"Then, next is the one who heals our wounds."

Freivartz hurriedly began the next introduction. This was because he was worried Jircniv would be displeased.

This time, the man at Freivartz's left stepped forward.

"Forgive me," he said as the strange staff he held made a ringing noise. That weapon was apparently called a "shakujo".

"This humble monk goes by the name Unkei and is a follower of the Buddha. Pleased to meet you."

Though he was dressed strangely, he seemed quite a bit more civilized than the Beast Lord from just before.

After he removed his bizarre, large hat — called a fukaamigasa — the head thus revealed had no hair upon it. If he had not known that the man had shaved it all off himself, Jircniv might have looked pityingly upon him. He was quite young, after all.
(TL Note: the fukaamigasa is a straw hat associated with monks)

He wore a strange battle robe called a kasa. He was a *soryo*, who were spiritual magic casters that lacked a bit in the healing department, but which showed exceptional power when battling the undead.
(TL Note: kasa are cassocks associated with Buddhist monks)

The Buddha he followed hailed from the far South, and had few followers. Some viewed him as one of the followers of the Four Gods. There was little known about him and there had been no interest in building a temple to such a god within the Imperial Capital. However, Jircniv did know that this man's existence was considered a nuisance of sorts.

Basically, the temples set the price for the use of healing magic. However, when a lone, unaffiliated user of healing magic appeared, how would they deal with him? What would they do if that man was also an adventurer of the highest order — an adamantite-ranked adventurer?

There was no particular link between the Empire's government and its religion. The fact that Jircniv had no ties to them could be considered good fortune.

He did not want to be further embroiled in troublesome issues.

However, when checking through the man's record, he found that he displayed exceptional performance against the undead, which immediately drew Jircniv's attention. If need be, he might need to apply the necessary pressure to the temples. Of course, that was only if his abilities were really that effective.

"I see. Then, the last one must be Powapon."

"It is as you say, Your Majesty."

The man Freivartz had saved for last was stranger than the ones before him. He was arguably the most bizarrely-dressed of the five men, and he lowered his head to Jircniv.

His bare upper body was tanned black with strange white patterns painted all over him. This was probably because he was a member of the odd class called the Totem Shamans.

"...Aren't you cold?"

"I have already equipped a magic item which protects against shifts in the temperature, so there is no problem at all."

Jircniv could not help but feel surprised at the reply, which was more normal than he had expected. He had received reports about his queer appearance, as well as the news that he was a regular person under all that. Still, the sheer dissonance filled him with surprise. At a closer look, he seemed quite handsome, and quite young as well.

Why had he chosen this class? Part of him wanted to know, but at the same time he did not want to now.

Jircniv regarded Silver Canary before him.

This was a weird team made up of weird members. The only thing they had in common was that they carried a feather of the silver canary their team had once raised somewhere on their persons (in the case of the Totem Shaman, it was on his waist).

Those feathers glittered with silver light, as though they had just been shed.

"Understood, gentlemen. Then, I'll be in your care today."

"Leave it to us, Your Majesty. Think of it as coming aboard our ship."

Jircniv could not help but grin wryly as he heard Freivartz's words, and made to leave. However —

"—Hang on a bit, Yer Majesty," Seyde said in a dull voice.

"We've been hired to protect ya, Yer Majesty, so please don't walk so far ahead. That okay?"

"It is not a matter of being okay or not. You were hired to protect me, so I will do whatever you deem necessary. In addition, if you feel that you need to make use of their strength, please feel free to order them around. However, I'd like to request that they be kept near me as much as possible."

"Well how about that. So we can command the Empire's Four Knights as we please, I guess we've really hit the big leagues now. Still, it'll be fine if you two stay by His Majesty's side. If anything happens, just run when we give you the instruction. That oughta do it. Then, play us a tune, chief."

"Got it. My apologies for Seyde's tone, Your Majesty. No matter how many times I tell him, he always ends up doing that…"

"No need to worry. That said, it might be troublesome if he did that in a public area…"

Perhaps Freivartz had gotten the message, but he nodded slightly. That implied that he knew the right time and place for this sort of thing.

And then, he sang. No, this was less of a song than a collection of bizarre sounds. This was because there were some parts he could hear, but not understand. It stopped after several seconds, although the strange music lingered in their hearts. Then, Seyde made his move.

If one had to attach some form of sound effect to his movements, both "sluggish" and "slimy" would be appropriate. Either way, Jircniv was not capable of those movements.

"Then, please keep about ten meters back and follow me."

They did as Seyde said, keeping ten meters back before moving on. Jircniv took the opportunity to ask Freivartz about the song from just now.

"What was that, anyway?"

"Does Your Majesty not know? That was a bard skill, a spellsong. It differs from user to user, and can be performed with various instruments, but in my case, I evoke its effects through song."

"So that's it, huh."

Freivartz could not help but smile as he saw Jircniv mumble to himself. Just at that moment, Jircniv remembered something he wanted to learn about, but did not have a chance to follow up on. He decided to take this opportunity and asked:

“...I have something to ask you. Can that spellsong control people?”

“Spellsongs can convey a suggestion effect, just as spells can. It should be possible. In addition, they should be able to charm people, to a certain extent.”

Jircniv looked at Freivartz.

“I see… is that so…”

“That should be it, yes.”

So that monster had the power of a bard, unless—

“Then, what do you know of monsters which look like frogs?”

—Unless it was an innate ability as a monster. That possibility could not be completely crossed out. It was very important to make sure of that.

“Frogs? You mean like Giant Toads?”

“No, not like that. Something more intelligent. I’m talking about a monster which stands on two legs, and can instantly activate something like that spellsong.”

“...Do you mean a Toadman? A Toadman bard would fit your description… but if I recall correctly, Toadmen are not particularly outstanding demihumans. Perhaps if it was an old, tribe leader-class Toadman... I’ve heard those can use special abilities to confuse the foe.”

What happened there was not quite confusion.

He had read about the demihumans known as Toadmen, but their appearances differed slightly from the monster called Demiurge. Could he be a mutant or offshoot Toadman, or perhaps a king-type Toadman? Those possibilities could not be discarded, but it was most likely that those were not the case.

"It seems not. My deepest apologies, Your Majesty. There is simply too little information. Perhaps, if you could tell me more about the creature in question, I might be able to solve this mystery for you."

That was like a life preserver to a drowning man.

"Really now. Then, I shall tell you about the appearance of this monster. If possible, could you use your wisdom to help me out? In addition, could you tell me in detail about spellsongs?"

In the Empire, there was probably nobody who knew more about monsters than adamantite-ranked adventurers.

"Your Majesty, that would be imposing on them. These are their livelihoods you're talking about."

Freivartz chuckled in response to Baziwood's words.

"Well well, it's true we can't talk too much about our trump cards. Still, answering that question earlier should be fine. Just… would it not be better to ask that great magic caster-dono? I'm sure he would know more than us…"

Jircniv strove not to show any information when the topic of Fluder came up.

He had already issued a gag order on Fluder's betrayal, so no information had been leaked. For now, Fluder was still in his position as the head magician, though his privileges and powers were slowly being stripped away so he would not notice. At the same time, he was looking for a way to fill the gap Fluder would leave.

From the size of that gap, Jircniv realised exactly how much of a boon Fluder had been for the Empire, but it was already too late.

"We can't keep relying on the old man. This is like homework for a student. If one simply waits for all the answers because one had a good teacher, he'll wind up being scolded for it."

Jircniv's words were met with several laughs.

“Indeed, Your Majesty has a point. I understand. Well, the fees for this request were quite above average, given the task we were hired to perform. Then, I’ll summarize the matter of spellsongs for you later.”

“I see. I’ll leave that to you, then.”

There were several VIP rooms in the arena. One was reserved for the arena’s investors. One was reserved for high-ranking nobles. Then, there was the one reserved for the Emperor, for a total of three. They were currently heading for the room that had been set aside for the Emperors through the generations. Perhaps Seyde had scouted the route before, but he did not ask the way even though he was leading the group.

At last they arrived, but at the corner before they could see the door of the room, Seyde reached a hand out to Jircniv, indicating that he should stop.

“Not picking up anyone here, but let me go first. Can you guys wait at this corner for a bit?”

He did not wait for a response to his whispered words, but instead turned the corner like he was going for a stroll. His curiosity piqued by this, Jircniv had a look of curiosity on his face as he tried to spy out the situation.

He approached the door without making a sound, and after doing something, he slowly opened the door. Although he had barely cracked it open, that seemed to be enough for him to enter, and his entire body vanished into the room.

After a while, the door opened, and they could see Seyde’s face within.

“It’s fine. This room is safe.”

The group entered the room, which had been verified as safe.

Jircniv looked around.

It was a little small, but the exquisitely-made furniture was all first-class. The room had been immaculately cleaned for the Emperor, who hardly visited.

A large window had been opened on the side of the room which overlooked the arena, allowing a panoramic view of the scenes below. If one squinted, they would be able to see rows upon rows of fully occupied seats, packed with an audience which was excited to a fever pitch and cheering wildly.

The reason for the large crowd was because the Martial Lord had been suddenly scheduled for an appearance.

The king of the ring — the Martial Lord — was overwhelmingly powerful. There was nobody he could fight in earnest. Therefore, it had been a long time since there had been a match with the Martial Lord.

It was because of such a long-awaited battle with the Martial Lord that the crowd had come, drawn by anticipation of the heroic figure who would battle him.

As expected, a big reason for that was admiration for strength. Since the Empire had its professional warriors called knights, the battlefield was like another world for the dwellers of the Imperial City. This was why they looked forward to the spectacle of a life-and-death battle.

No, he had heard there were knights who enjoyed the arena as well.

In other words, they looked forward to a spectacle and display of brutality.

Just as Jircniv was spaced out while thinking of this, Silver Canary completed their sweep of the room.

“Were there any signs of divination magic being used in here?”

“We discovered no traces of such magic, Your Majesty. Is that right?”

“Yup. Well, seeing if spells have been cast is pretty hard for me, so I did a look-see around, checked for any magic items, but nothing turned up. Still, hope ya don’t forget that I don’t have the perception of a thief. Please don’t think it’s absolutely safe… well, our chief’s boosted our detection ability with his spellsong, so it should be fine.”

“Regarding the field of magic, this humble monk has used a divination to investigate the surroundings. However, there were no traces of any spells being cast. In any event, I have created a magical barrier which should impede divination spells, so one can assume that it should be fine.”

Unkei thumped his shakujo on the ground, and a clear ringing echoed through the room.

“Then, may I make another request? Is there magic which detects the presence of people nearby? It would be best if it was a spell which could detect even an invisible person.”

“Regretfully, this humble monk does not count such spells among his repertoire. However, I believe our leader has such a spell.”

Freivartz, whose name had come up, signalled that he understood and left the room.

“Now what? What measures will you take if the foe intends to eavesdrop upon us?”

Jircniv strove to think of what he could do against Ainz Ooal Gown. However, it was impossible to imagine what surpassed the imagination. The fact was, that man seemed so massive in his mind that everything he could visualize felt insignificant against him.

“...Frankly speaking, I think it should be fine after doing this much. At least, that’s what I think. Don’t look at me like that, we’ve fortified ourselves with several spells already, right?”

“That’s how it is, Your Majesty. This humble monk has already used anti-divination magic and configured it so that any attempt at magical investigation will send an alert to me. Please be at ease.”

Seyde and Unkei spoke thusly, one after the other.

Did they think he was obsessed? Or did they think he had gone a little mad because he was worried about assassination?

Still, what would these two think if he told them they were going up against the Sorcerer King? Now that was what really interested Jircniv. Would they say, “we can’t possibly prepare enough against him?” Or would they say, “If we’d known that, we wouldn’t have come for this measly sum”?

Naturally, the best scenario was to not tell them anything about the Sorcerer King and have them prepare against all threats as best as they could.

Still, no matter how much he tried to censor information on the Sorcerer King, he could not stopper 60,000 mouths.

News had probably gotten out. That being the case, since adventurers tended to spend more time gathering information the higher-ranked they were, there was a very large chance they had already learned about the Sorcerer King’s abilities.

It wouldn’t be hard for them to figure out why I really wanted them here, no?

After pondering various possibilities, Jircniv decided to bluff his way through with a warm smile.

The two of them realised that Jircniv could not accept what they had said. Neither did they have anything else to say beyond that.

A great cheer rose up from the arena.

From where they were, it would seem that one of the battles between the gladiators had a winner.

In the past, the defeated were condemned to death, but not any more. There were still cases of deaths in battles, but there would be no killings after the victor was determined.

Apparently, a gladiator had been spared because his repeated defeats were amusing. This allowed him to awaken his true power and he became champion, whereupon that particular restriction had been abolished. This decision had been made because there might be another person like him someday.

Which Martial Lord was that? Although he couldn't compare to the current Martial Lord, he was apparently quite a powerful chap. But, these people aren't loyal to any country. I need to think about how to get them on my side...

"In any event, we're done here, Your Majesty."

Jircniv turned when he heard Freivartz's voice.

"Thanks."

He should probably have been more sincere in his thanks toward these adamantite-ranked adventurers. However, he had simply tossed off the usual appreciation instead.

"You're welcome. Still, we were hired for protection, so should we stand by in this room?"

They were hired as bodyguards. With that in mind, it was a reasonable suggestion.

However, would it really be alright to have secret talks with them in the room?

Granted, there might be merits to involving them in this. However, once they realised what he was aiming for, he ran the risk of making unnecessary enemies.

Still, they're nothing compared to that — what am I thinking? I'm comparing every challenge I meet to that monster, that's proof that I'm starting to go mad, if nothing else. Besides, it would be stupid to keep making enemies.

Jircniv shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but there will be important talks taking place after this. It would be quite troublesome to have you waiting in here."

"However, it'll be very difficult to protect you that way, Your Majesty."

"There are two men I trust in this room. They ought to be able to buy enough time for you to get here."

“Well, that’s true,” the hereto silent Ape suddenly said. “However, if the enemy is an assassin on the level of Seyde and if things go wrong, they might end up making quite a mess.”

“When you talk about an assassin of my level, you’re probably talking about that girl from Ijaniya. She’s the kind who can use ninjutsu to suddenly attack from the shadows.”

“Well, with these two warriors around, a sword-wielding foe should not pose any difficulty. However, what about magic? It is precisely that point which makes this humble monk uneasy. In addition, I feel that we will be more interested by the match than any talks Your Majesty is conducting, no?”

They had all ended up trying to persuade him to let him stay, but since Jircniv was this determined to not let information leak out, he could not accept their suggestions.

“Your doubts are well-reasoned, gentlemen. However, I cannot compromise on this point, be it as a man or as the Emperor of the Empire.”

Silver Canary looked to their leader, who sighed deeply.

“It can’t be helped, then. I’m sure Your Majesty must have your reasons which you can’t disclose to us. Then, we’ll stand watch outside. However, can you tell us exactly who is coming?”

“A reasonable question. However, you have to pretend that you saw nothing. Can you?”

“Of course. We will not reveal anything, no matter who comes. If it gets out, we will gladly bear the consequences.”

“I trust you. First are the High Priests of the God of Fire and the God of Wind. There will be four other priests with them.”

“I see. Then, we’ll be on guard for anyone besides these people.”

"Ah, please do. This VIP room was segregated from the other VIP rooms during its construction. I doubt anyone will get lost and wander here by accident."

"Understood… Also, is it alright if we break the lock on the doors, Your Majesty?"

"You may destroy them if you see fit."

Fan stepped forward. A sinewy, scratchy sound came from his hands, which clutched the hilts of his battleaxes with a force that no human could match. It seemed a bit excessive just to break a lock, but Jircniv was no warrior, and had no room to comment.

However, the two members of the Four Knights had surprised looks on their faces as they spoke quietly to each other. That got Jircniv's attention.

Fan slowly raised his battleaxes.

"—Ah, you can't break the doors."

Fan stopped halfway as he heard Freivartz speak. Jircniv's brows furrowed.

"Why not? Weren't we going with the plan of 'Oh, we were planning to break the lock, but we wrecked the door too, what a shame, why don't we come in as well?' or something?"

"Don't do that this time. I don't want to get involved in that complex political stuff."

"Indeed. This humble monk does not wish to be even more hated by the temples."

"All right. Then this much should be enough."

Fan gently swung his battle axe, and effortlessly broke the lock.

He should have been speechless. Or perhaps he should have been displeased. Perhaps he should have felt many things, but all Jircniv felt was impressed. It made him think, *as expected of an adamantite-ranked adventurer*.

He was not impressed with how he could so easily break a lock with a battleaxe, but by the sheer audacity of openly saying such things in front of the highest authority in this country. In addition, there was the arrogance it took to declare that they were willing to ignore the wishes of their client — who was also the most powerful man in the country — in order to do the best job they could.

These were the things that Jircniv now lacked.

"...I might as well drag them all into the mud of bureaucracy so they can't escape."

Just as Jircniv quietly mumbled that, the members of Silver Canaries fled like frightened rabbits, as though they had arranged it from the beginning.

The only people left with Jircniv were the two knights, who looked at each other.

"That was impressive. They worked together so closely without any form of communication. ...Perhaps that's only to be expected? They're adamantite-ranked because they can do that."

"...Well, I don't know what to say. Though, it might not be quite right to admire them… Your Majesty, should we make drinks?"

"We should. Sorry about that. Can you help me with the preparations?"

"Understood. Then, come help out too, Baziwood-dono."

Baziwood frowned at the suggestion.

"Eh? Me too? Your Majesty, we should have brought a maid along, shouldn't we? Our guests would probably find the drinks tastier if a girl was serving them. I mean, I know I would."

“Yes, yes. Enough complaining. Baziwood-dono, please be extra careful.”

“Please, Baziwood. There’s no point wishing for what we can’t get. We have to work with what we have. Just like the Empire.”

“That analogy could use some work, Your Majesty,” Baziwood spoke as he busied himself with the preparations.

Cries of encouragement rang out from the arena below, and there were howls which sounded slightly different from those of wild beasts.

The next match had already started.

Jircniv searched his memories.

The match before the Martial Lord’s was apparently between adventurers and monsters. Matches where adventurers fought were quite popular with the audience, because it was more likely that they would be flashy affairs laced with magical explosions and the like.

Jircniv felt very touched as he looked down on the heated intensity below him, and he said

“What a peaceful sight.”

“Really, Your Majesty?”

As he wondered why someone was responding to his self-directed mutterings, Jircniv turned to see Baziwood standing before him. Nimble had a look of annoyance on his face as he handled Baziwood’s share of the work as well.

“Doesn’t seem peaceful to me at all. Just look.”

One of the adventurers was struck by the claw of a bestial monster, and blood flew through the air. The audience wailed and shouted their encouragement.

“I didn’t mean the fight, I meant the audience.”

Jircniv looked over the loudly-shouting crowd.

"Is this not a peaceful sight, compared to the situation which the Empire is in? If the people knew the sort of monsters which lurked under that thin, fragile layer of skin, do you think they could enjoy themselves like this?"

"But isn't peace good? There's no point letting the people go around with aching bellies, is there?"
Baziwood was right.

Jircniv deeply regretted the pointless words he had spoken.

"You're right, Baziwood. Then, it's almost time. What about the preparations?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I was a bit worried we would not make it in time because *somebody* was not helping out, but the drinks and paper are all laid out. So is the ink."

The astounding quantity of ink and paper was in case someone was eavesdropping on the VIP room. Although he felt that the cheering was loud enough and this room was distant enough from the others for that not to be a problem, and listening alone could only get one so much, it did not hurt to be redundantly prepared.

He knew it was very troublesome. He had done this before in the Imperial City, but this was really very tiring.

The reason he had gone to such cumbersome lengths was because the might of the Sorcerous Kingdom was an unknown value.

If he knew what they could and could not do, his response might have changed.

He had planned to use the war to mount an investigation, but it had ended in a truly horrific manner, leading to a terrible tragedy. Still, he could not completely give up on his investigations. He thought of other methods, but if they were no safer than before, then he could only tremble before the enemy's shadow. But even if he did get any results, even if he did uncover any actionable methods, he might end up being paralyzed by that same shadow to the point where he might as well give up.

No, he could not forget that heat that passed through his throat.

“Ainz Ooal Gown — if I knew the limits of the Sorcerer King’s power, I might not have needed to go this far.”

At that point, he had asked him to help as a collaborator, but now that he was a king and a peer, asking him for such help was nearly impossible. No, he could still ask, but thinking about the potential price of such aid made his head ache.

“It’s not just the Sorcerer King, Your Majesty. It’s pretty bad as long as we don’t know what his vassals can do, right?”

“That’s correct.”

“...What if those subordinates are stronger than the Sorcerer King himself?”

“How could that be? That’s impossible, right?”

Jircniv broke into a cold sweat at that answer.

As he reflected on the fact that the Four Knights were stronger than him — and that they were his subordinates — he could not bring himself to say that it was impossible. One who stood above others did not need pure physical strength, but other things.

What if Ainz Ooal Gown was like that?

“—No, it can’t be. Listen, Nimble. You’ve got it wrong. Understood?”

“Yes! Sorry, Your Majesty.”

If that was really the case, then they were finished. He hoped that at the very most, those subordinates would be equal to the Sorcerer King — and Jircniv was desperately praying to the gods that they would be weaker than him.

As he thought, they did not have enough information.

I guess we should continue that plan of trying to learn something from that Dark Elf girl, with the knowledge that it could be dangerous. Granted, we can't buy a lot of slaves from the Theocracy, but maybe that method could… Or perhaps trying the boy (Aura) would be better? No, he looks too young, so using women on him probably won't work. Besides, he seems quite strong-willed.

Just as Jircniv settled in for a long contemplation, a knocking came from the door.

The three men looked at each other, and then Nimble went to open the door.

As expected, Freivartz was there.

"Your Majesty, the guests have arrived. There are six people in total and I've met the High Priests before, so I believe it's them."

"Then, please come in—"

Just as he said that, Seyde chipped in.

"Whoa, whoa hang on a tick, you guys in the back. Numbers add up, but something's off? The two of you in the back feel like me. So, you're from the punishment squad of the temples — the ones who kill apostate priests? I thought you guys were just supposed to be boogeymen?"

"This humble monk is quite surprised too."

"Whose people are you?"

"Good grief, how troublesome. It would have been fine if you had just let us pass without incident… Firstly, you are mistaken. I — no, we have a good reason to be here. Namely, because the Emperor invited us. He'll be unhappy if you show hostility to us, you know."

"H—m. Okay, so could you wait there for a bit? Let me check if you guys are telling the truth here."

He let Jircniv see their faces. There was the High Priest of the Fire God, the High Priest of the Wind God, as well as four others he had not seen before.

They wore dark-colored hoods which prevented him from seeing their full faces, and that was the most suspicious part.

Since this was the first time they had met, there was no guarantee that they actually were emissaries of the Theocracy. However, since the High Priests were there as well, things would not be able to progress if he did not believe them. The Sorcerer King would be the only one who benefited from any internal disputes which resulted.

“They are the guests I was waiting for. Sorry, but could you let them in?”

The members of Silver Canary had shocked looks on their faces, but they still let them pass.

Even after the doors were closed, they did not lower their hoods.

Jircniv did not say anything about their impolite behavior. They were probably just as wary as Jircniv was, and the object of their mutual caution was the Sorcerer King.

“It seems my guards have inconvenienced you. I apologize.”

“Please, pay it no heed. The truth is, those adamantite-ranked adventurers were right about the two people in the back.”

The two emissaries took a seat, while the other two people stood at attention behind them.

Jircniv wrote the word “Scripture” on the sheet of paper he had. His response was a faint smile, but it spoke more than any words could. The Theocracy’s special forces were known as the Scriptures, so they must have come from one of the Six Scriptures.

“Then, why don’t we enjoy the fight first? The main event is about to begin, is it not?”

Jircniv nodded to that question.

The main event was when the excitement of the crowd reached its peak, and so the noise intensified. This would make eavesdropping very difficult, which was why he had chosen this time and this place.

The emissary produced a document and handed it to Jircniv.

Jircniv carefully revealed the document, so as not to let it be seen from the back or the sides, and saw several questions there.

Simply put, they were asking why he had asked the Sorcerer King to use that spell.

Then, they asked about the Emperor's position on the matter.

About how much they knew about the Sorcerous Kingdom.

It was couched in the most diplomatic of terms, but it was still a questionnaire.

While they could have simply mailed it to him, the reason why he had managed to get them all the way here was because they feared the reach of the Sorcerous Kingdom's arms. Or perhaps it was because they did not trust the Empire.

Dissatisfaction welled up in Jircniv's chest. However, when he recalled their relationship with the Sorcerous Kingdom, it was only natural that they would not trust them at all.

Jircniv filled in his answers just as a round of cheering went up. It would seem the match was about to begin.

"Before this grand bout, let me call your attention to Emperor El-Nix, who has come to spectate the battle! Ladies and gentlemen*, please look to the VIP room above you!"*

It was the announcer's voice, amplified by a magic item.

"Excuse me."

Jircniv rose, so the audience below him could see his face.

The people cheered as one for Jircniv. He turned his handsome face to the people, and smiled silently to them. The women began shrieking for him, and Jircniv felt quite satisfied that his popularity had not yet waned.

"Thank you very much! Then, next up, ladies and gentlemen, the long-awaited battle with the Martial Lord! The preparations will take a while, so please be patient."

"The Martial Lord, huh," Jircniv muttered.

Jircniv had once asked Baziwood about letting all the Four Knights battle the Martial Lord. He had laughed and said they had no chance of winning. The answer worried him, so he let Fluder gather some information about the Martial Lord. The results showed that the Martial Lord was a being that was so powerful that it was unfair.

"Still, who is the Martial Lord fighting, Your Majesty?"

The question from the emissary was an obvious one. The fact was, Jircniv did not have an answer for him.

"I'm not too sure myself. This match with the Martial Lord seems to have been hastily decided and did not appear on the program either, for secrecy's sake."

"I see," the emissary replied.

"Well, anyone who could go one on one with the Martial Lord must be an adamantite-ranked adventurer. However, Silver Canary is here, so it must be someone from Eight Ripples. Honestly, I really can't approve of exhibition matches with a chance of killing one of the rare adamantite-ranked adventurers."

"I cannot completely refute that, but the fact is that strength is attractive. This place is probably best suited for letting the people see an example of overwhelming power and giving them a dream of making it their own."

The man who interrupted was the High Priest of the God of Fire — in other words, the highest-ranking member of the God of Fire's faith.

“That said, after considering the Empire’s present condition, it’s possible that it might end up lowering its military strength. The Martial Lord is the Empire’s mightiest being. Why not enlist him into your forces?”

“...To think someone like you would actually say something like that.”

The Slaine Theocracy was a human-centric country. No, it would be better to say that they looked down on the countries of other races.

They were a nation that could still exist in a world filled with various races after advertising that fact. One had to hand it to them. Or rather, one could say that uniting a species was a condition of building a strong nation.

“That’s just my personal opinion. It doesn’t reflect on my country. Well, that’s enough chit-chat for now, Your Majesty. Can I have your reply?

“Indeed. Then—”

“—The wait is over, ladies and gentlemen! Introducing our challenger!”

Jircniv’s hand stopped as he was about to write the answer to the first question. This was because he was curious about the challenger, who was brave enough to issue a challenge to that Martial Lord. Being acknowledged as a challenger meant that he must be able to put up quite a fight. Did anyone like that still exist in the Empire?

If he was outstanding enough and was willing to serve the Empire, he would employ him even if he lost. Depending on how things went, he might end up giving him the seat on the Four Knights that “The Immovable” had left empty after his death.

“..The name of the challenger may well be known to many in the audience. That great man has come to grace us today! I give you, the Sorcerer King of the Sorcerous Kingdom, His Majesty! Ainz! Ooal! Gown!”

“—Haaaah?”

That sound of utter stupefaction escaped from Jircniv.

He did not understand the announcer's words as they buried themselves into his brain.

Confusion filled the arena, and the VIP room was deathly silent.

Jircniv looked around him, and he was sure that everyone had heard the same thing.

"Ainz Ooal Gown?"

—Impossible.

Of course it was impossible. The leader of a country could not possibly appear in a gladiatorial match in another country. This was obvious to anyone with common sense. It was not as if he was a barbarian.

In the first place, they had been keeping an eye on the Sorcerous Kingdom's movements. If the Sorcerer King had entered the Empire, that matter would have reached Jircniv's ears immediately. It would have been an absolute top priority matter. He had arranged to have that news reach him whether he was in his harem or in some other place.

If that news had not reached him despite all these efforts, that meant—

He secretly entered the country? Why would anyone do that? And he came to the arena? What on earth is he think— what? Could it be? Is that how it is? This… how is this possible?

Jircniv's body shuddered uncontrollably.

Then, he shifted his line of sight to look at the emissaries from the Slaine Theocracy.

There were keen looks in those eyes under their hoods, and the looks in those eyes said only one thing. No, in all likelihood, Jircniv would have reached the same conclusion if he was in their shoes.

They were thinking: *Jircniv called the Sorcerer King here.*

“Please wait. This is a trap!”

Indeed.

All this was a conspiracy of Ainz Ooal Gown. If they did not understand that — no, if they could not accept that, the situation would become very dire.

“A trap laid by the Sorcerous Kingdom? Or by someone else? After all, this is the place you specified, Your Majesty, and we only learned about it a few hours ago.”

That was correct. He had been keeping everything hidden until the last moment in order to reduce the risk of information leaking out.

Jircniv desperately tried to recall who knew about this matter. The number was very small, and all of them were reliable people. Or was that really the case?

No—

“—It’s possible that the information was extracted through magical domination. This is definitely not a part of my plan. This is the proof. If I had set this trap, would I be so panicked right now?”

“You expect us to believe that? Were you doing this to draw us in? Or perhaps, to sell us out?!”

They did not trust him at all.

No, that was to be expected. Jircniv would be castigating them if he were in their place.

Still, where was the leak? No, did it really leak? Could it be all this was all within the palm of his hand? He set out the bait, and waited for me to take the hook—

Suddenly , a chill wind blew across his back.

How many of his actions had the Sorcerer King predicted?

It was very possible that everything that had happened until now was part of his plan.

The Sorcerer King is such an opponent, Jircniv's brilliant mind concluded.

How elaborate was his scheme, anyway? No, now's not the time to be afraid of his cunning! If I don't act quickly—!

"No good, we have to leave now—"

However, it was too late.

The intruder's voice was like that of a hunter who had seen his prey fall into a carefully-laid trap.

"Jircniv Rune Farlord El-Nix-dono. It has been a while."

As he struggled to control his panicked breathing, he saw the form of the Sorcerer King, who had ascended from the heart of the arena to the same height as that of the VIP room.

That hateful face of his was on full display. It must have been to let everyone know that it was the man himself.

"Thuh, the— huu. The same to you, Gown-dono. I did not think I would meet you in a place like this."

He had no idea what to say. Just about anything he said could be held against him. However, Jircniv's lips did not open, as if they had been glued shut.

"The feeling is mutual. What a coincidence!"

Kuku, the Sorcerer King laughed evilly. He obviously did not feel it was a coincidence.

It was not a coincidence at all.

Jircniv was certain that all this was part of Ainz Ooal Gown's scheme.

By taking control of the secret talks with the Theocracy, he would simultaneously apply pressure on both Jircniv and the Theocracy and prevent them from allying with each other.

That was a truly twisted genius.

He wiped his sweaty palms on his clothes.

A lot of information must have leaked out. The question was, how much of it did he know?

Just as Jircniv was struggling to think, the hateful lights in the Sorcerer King's eye sockets turned to regard the Theocracy's emissaries.

"Friends of yours, Your Majesty?"

Jircniv had no way of answering Ainz's question.

This was no simple question.

It was a test of his intentions.

Would he lie to protect the people of the Theocracy, or sell them out, as a friend of the Sorcerous Kingdom?

It was such a malicious scheme that Jircniv began feeling nauseous.

That emotionless skull looked like it was twisted by evil. It must be mocking him, Jircniv, who could not speak.

"What's wrong? El-Nix — no, Jircniv-dono. You look pale. Are you unwell?"

The fact that he sounded genuinely concerned first disgusted, and then terrified him. He felt like a small animal, squirming within a loving hand. As a human being, it was only natural to feel that terror wrapped up in that joy.

"It, it's fine, it's nothing. I seem to have gotten a little dizzy from standing up so suddenly."

"Is that so. Well, they say your body is your best asset, you'd best take care of it."

Jircniv's excuse sounded very unnatural, but at least he was off the hook for now. Was he waiting for the right moment to finish off his prey, or was he indulging his beloved hobby of sadism? Or perhaps—

"Then, would you gentlemen like to introduce yourselves? I am the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown."

—Perhaps that was what he was aiming for.

Since he, as the leader of a country, had already stated his name, the other side could not retreat without saying a word. If they gave a false name, if the Sorcerer King learned their real names, how would he react then?

Stop toying with us!!!

His expression had not changed, or rather, that was because it was a skinless and fleshless skull. Not only did he not have eyes, the empty orbits of his eyes were occupied only by dancing crimson flames, from which no emotions could be read. Yet, Jircniv could feel that evil grin widening.

"Thank you very much, and in truth we would have introduced ourselves as well. However, a dire emergency awaits our attention, so we must leave immediately. I am sure His Majesty will be more than happy to tell you about us afterwards."

The emissaries rose from their seats.

"Is that so? What a shame. I do hope we will meet again. Please be well until then. Then, there is still the matter of the match, so please excuse me."

With those parting words of mockery (probably), the Sorcerer King descended.

As his shape vanished below, the emissaries glared at Jircniv.

“How dare you set us up.”

“No, I didn’t!”

“You didn’t? No matter how you look at it, he knew everything about his place. Everything he has done is clearly to mock a bunch of fools who are moving exactly as he predicted ...How much of this did you tell him? How many people were you going to betray to save your own country? You must have asked him to use that illogically destructive spell too, did you not?”

Jircniv desperately cast his eyes toward the priests, seeking help.

However, he did not see suspicion and doubt in their eyes, but hostility and disappointment.

The Sorcerer King had struck a magnificent blow at the moment when it was most effective. It was one which would utterly cripple the Empire. It told the Empire that they had no choice left other than to betray humanity—

“Please believe me, I didn’t sell this information to him—”

“...Even if we did believe you, there’s no way you can deny the fact that your entire operation has been compromised. Your Majesty, I am sad to say that we will not be meeting again.”

After saying that, the emissaries made to leave, followed by the priests.

“Wait! I forbid you to leave this room until I hear your opinions!”

Nimble and Baziwood drew their weapons and prepared to make their move.

As Jircniv struggled to restore some life to his shattered heart, he stared at the two High Priests. The emissaries did not even look back as they left.

“You, tell me what the temples think. What do you think about the Sorcerer King!”

“...The Sorcerer King is a wicked, undead being, and we will not suffer it to call itself King.”

Before Jircniv could answer, the High Priest of the God of Fire continued: “However, we cannot defeat it in battle, so we must find some way to destroy it.”

“Betray us if you will, oh Emperor, you who have been seduced by the power of evil.”

That statement, made by the High Priest of the Wind God, clearly illustrated their hostility towards Jircniv.

This was extremely bad.

The temples could not influence the government. However, they might well decide to excommunicate an Emperor who was in league with the universal enemy, the undead.

He could not purge them, because the temples were in charge of healing, as well as the saviors of the peoples’ souls.

If he did that, the Empire would fall apart from the inside.

To Jircniv, that single move by Ainz Ooal Gown felt like the sweep of the Grim Reaper’s scythe. Even if he did nothing, the Empire would collapse. Then, the Sorcerous Kingdom would find some reason to come calling.

If it was Jircniv doing it, he would use an excuse along the lines of “The country of our ally is in chaos, so we’re sending troops over to help maintain public order.”

Judging by their reaction, the Slaine Theocracy would not criticize the Sorcerous Kingdom for doing such a thing. The Kingdom would not have the strength to do anything about it, while the City-State Alliance would take a while to make such a statement.

What kind of enticements could he offer to remove the doubts from their hearts? Or rather, to keep to their commitments, even if they had doubts?

Jircniv had always placed that topic foremost in his heart when he spoke to others in his capacity as Emperor. The simplest way to get people to take action was to appeal to their desires. Jircniv had grown up knowing this to be the right way to view things. There were so many humans who were ruled by desire for a pretty face that it was hardly surprising.

However, at this moment, Jircniv could not find an answer.

Now that others thought he had betrayed humanity to work with the undead, there was nothing he could offer them.

All he could do was sincerely and earnestly tell his side of the story.

“Please allow me to say one last thing. That fellow’s cunning surpasses mine. These developments might well be his doing. ...While I know I would not believe that so easily if I were in your shoes… I truly did not sell you out. And while you might not believe this either, as a human being I wish to tell you one thing. The Sorcerer King’s reign is very merciful. The people of E-Rantel still live in peace.”

“But we have no idea how long that will last, do we?”

“Perhaps. But for the time being, at least, they are safe. If we embark on a war which we cannot win, our country will start going down the road to annihilation. So I hope you will think carefully and not make any rash moves.”

The two High Priests looked at each other.

Then, their previous hostility toward Jircniv seemed to mellow a little.

“...It seems we may have been too emotional. If that undead creature truly is as the rumors say he is, we cannot discard the possibility that all this might have been part of his plan. Then, may we meet again somewhere, if it is meant to be.”

“Thank you. And before that, I have a request. No matter where, please watch that fellow fight in the arena. If you can see a way to defeat him, please tell me.”

Jircniv lowered his head.

Conspiracies included, there was no way to beat Ainz in a battle of wits. The human heart was the sole trump card left to those who wished to fight him evenly.

Cheering came from downstairs, and Jircniv turned to look at it.

“...Good luck, Martial Lord. Oh, gods!”

Jircniv prayed in earnest for the victory of the Martial Lord.

Part 3

The much-awaited Imperial Capital.

As he peered through the slight gap he had opened in the coach's window, Ainz felt a terrible sense of defeat.

Life and energy abounded here.

The faces of the people were bright. It was a bustling city, completely unlike the dreary Sorcerous Kingdom.

And then, the sense of defeat soon faded away. After all, his city had been annexed recently. When a city was taken over by a new ruler, life would change. It was only natural that people would feel uneasy, leading to a temporary state of low energy.

Punitto Moe had once taught Ainz about strategy games. When one conquered territory during a war, the happiness value of the people would plummet. Also—

—What did he say about partisans appearing? The heck? Why would a large amount of weapons appear all of a sudden?

The first part was completely unrelated to the second. He had the feeling that he had gotten something wrong somewhere.

Since the game had nothing to do with YGGDRASIL, he had lost interest halfway. However, they should have been vaguely related, at least.

He was probably talking about some kind of betrayal. Or maybe it was some form of player slang, huh… Partisans… seems to be a kind of polearm. So, when he talked about weapons being sold in large quantities, he was talking about a reason to fight? Citizen levies, maybe? Hm? Maybe they're fighting the new ruler, but that would be an uprising, right? Then it should have just been called a rebellion from the beginning. Why partisans? Well, it doesn't matter anyway...

The reason why there had been no rebellion in E-Rantel was because the Death Knights were patrolling to maintain public order. Or was it because the character of Momon had a calming effect on them? No, perhaps the root reason was because of his benevolent social policies.

...Nothing's better than a peaceful reign. Killing the goose for the golden eggs is utter foolishness. I guess I need to make the occasional concession like returning dropped items to an opponent after PKing them, perhaps.

As he recalled the contents of "PKing for Dummies", Ainz realised that he had gotten distracted, and hurriedly got his thoughts back on track.

Hang on, I was thinking about high energy. Well, no matter what, I only rule one city, and this is the capital of the Empire, which has many cities, so the difference in their energy levels can't be helped. Even their populations are different… So I guess as long as the number of people increases, the Sorcerous Kingdom will also become more vibrant… I guess I need to focus on policies which encourage a population increase. Albedo can carry them out.

After Ainz comforted himself, he decided upon a new direction to take, in his capacity as a ruler.

"Then, ah, Your Majesty..."

The man who was looking out the window as well spoke to him, and it brought Ainz back from his thoughts.

"I, I fear to ask, Your Majesty, but is this not the Imperial Capital, Arwintar?"

The man — who had practically been kidnapped — asked that question in a trembling voice.

"Indeed it is. As expected of the Adventurer's Guildmaster, you recognized this place at a glance."

"Thank, thank you very — no, wait! I don't recall us passing through any checkpoints! Isn't this illegal immigration?"

That was, in fact, what had happened. Since they had used the [Gate] spell to directly transit to the Imperial Capital, they would not have passed through any checkpoints.

"—Details, details."

"These aren't just details! A king crossing the border illegally into another country is an international incident!

Jircniv did the same thing when he came to Nazarick. Ainz did not say that, of course. Common sense would dictate that the Guildmaster was right and Ainz was wrong.

After thinking as hard as he could, he still could not think of an explanation which Ainzach would accept. Instead, he ended up sighing at the man's surprising stubbornness. He had thought he would be the kind of man to say, "Well, as long as you don't get caught".

His opinion of the man changed a little.

"...Guildmaster, I have a very good relationship with El-Nix-dono. I've even acceded to his requests in the past."

Ainz recalled what had happened during that war.

"Well, I know it's hardly the same thing, but I'm sure he would gladly approve if I just asked him. Granted, it would be after the fact… but wouldn't it be alright if the Emperor himself permitted it?"

"If, if you put it that way…"

"The most important thing is that neither you nor I have brought anything bad with us. Doesn't that mean it's fine?"

"Muu," Ainzach mused.

Ainz smiled in his heart, believing that he had convinced the other man.

In truth, there were two reasons for their clandestine crossing of the border.

If Jircniv knew about this, he would probably prepare a reception for me. He might be wary of Nazarick, but since I'm the king of an allied country, he would have to welcome me at the front door. That would be very bad.

The Emperor would surely host some kind of ceremony to welcome the king of an ally's country. That was something which Ainz, who was unfamiliar with the customs of noble society, had to avoid at all costs.

If he became a laughingstock because of that, he would not be able to look the Guardians — who were working hard for the Sorcerous Kingdom — in the eye.

There was also another reason.

Now, I need to think about how to get Ainzach involved in this. Perhaps I should ask for his help like I did when I spun that story at the guild?

The other reason was because he wanted to pressure Guildmaster Ainzach into his schemes.

Ainz's objective in coming here was to recruit adventurers.

He had already incorporated the Adventurer's Guild as a national organization. However, even if the shell was ready, filling it up would take a long time. This was quite bad for the Sorcerous Kingdom, since it only controlled one city and the number of adventurers they could draw on was completely insufficient. Using adventurers of other races — like Lizardmen, for example — was a matter for later. Right now, he had to increase the number of human adventurers.

This was why he had to come here to do talent scouting. If it was not enough, he could recruit from the surrounding countries as well.

However, this sort of recruitment was not easy, especially since Ainz was essentially going to do door-to-door sales — one of the hardest kinds of work in the sales business.

According to Ainzach, adventurers were supposedly freelancers, but in truth, they were a form of national defense against monsters. Headhunting them aggressively would lead to stiff backlash.

Of course, Ainz did not think he would lose, even if the Adventurer's Guilds of every single nation mounted a full-scale campaign against him. However, that would reduce the morale of any adventurers he did manage to recruit. It was quite easy to see how they would lose their motivation when seeing a conflict between their new allegiance and their former home.

This was why he had to involve Ainzach — who understood Ainz's aims and concepts — in all of this. Surely things would go smoothly if he was the middleman. He had considered that Ainzach would flat-out refuse if he told him about this in E-Rantel, so he had dragged him along like this.

In addition, he was also considering the fact that Ainzach would have something in common with the other side.

That was a secret of salesmanship. People tended to gravitate towards those who were similar to them.

Ainz — no, Suzuki Satoru had seen colleagues leverage the fact that they had been born in the same place or that they supported the same team as prospective clients to clinch a sale.

Having once been Momon the adventurer, Ainz understood the life of the adventurer, to some extent. However, he had risen through the ranks so quickly that he could not say that he truly knew the hardships of being an adventurer. Thus, he had to let Ainzach — who was a veteran adventurer and also the Adventurer's Guildmaster — speak for him to improve the other side's closeness to him.

In other words, the success of their little expedition to the Empire was reliant on Ainzach's performance.

Still, the question is, how can I truly motivate Ainzach to help?

If it was a matter of money, he could certainly pay. However, he did not imagine that such means would make Ainzach give his all.

“Let’s go.”

After commanding the driver, the coach began moving quietly. The driver in question was a creature which Ainz had summoned with what little gold he had left, a monster whose level was over 80, called Hanzo.

Hanzo was a humanoid ninja-type monster, and was skilled in countering stealth. There were others of roughly the same level, such as Kashin Koji, which was skilled in illusion. Fuuma, which was skilled in hand-to-hand combat and special techniques, Tobi Kato, which was skilled with weapons, and so on.

The interior of the coach clattered noisily as it travelled forward.

Ainz had considered that using a heavily-enchanted coach would be very suspicious. Thus, he had chosen a regular stagecoach instead.

“...Then, Your Majesty. Since we have already arrived at the Imperial Capital, can you tell me what we will be doing here?”

Ainzach furrowed his brows.

“We will be recruiting adventurers for our country.”

A bitter expression crossed Ainzach’s face. It was clear he was having trouble accepting that.

“...Could it be that you intend to persuade the adventurers of the Empire to join you?”

“Indeed. We will be headhunting in this country.”

While it had been done during a time of war, the fact that he had killed so many soldiers of the Kingdom would make it very difficult to attract the adventurers from the Kingdom to his camp. In addition, Albedo was visiting the Kingdom, so he could not make things difficult for her. That being the case, their allied country, the Empire, was the ideal option.

The City-State Alliance was some distance away from here, according to Fluder's intelligence on the countries. However, after consulting Demiurge and Albedo, he decided that intervening there was not wise.

"In what way will you proceed? I…"

Ainzach took a deep breath.

"...Your Majesty, I have engraved your views on adventurers deep into my heart. Thus, I wish to aid Your Majesty with all my strength. That said, I am still a man of the system, for the most part. I feel that having adventurers abandon everything they have known up till now would be very difficult. This is particularly true for the adventurers of the Empire."

A sensation of new, fresh joy welled up within Ainz's chest.

Indeed, Ainz wanted opinions like this.

It was not that the Guardians were at fault, but they took everything he said as a divine pronouncement and rushed to execute them. Thus, Ainz was frequently uneasy about whether or not he had given the right orders. Because of that, he had longed to hear someone oppose one of his statements. That way, he would know where the problems lay.

Ainz's opinion of Ainzach went up by a notch.

Still, he could not completely accept his views.

Heaven only knew why, but all his subordinates seemed to think that the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown was a genius. Thus, Ainz could not say or do anything to betray that faith. He could not disappoint them.

"...How baffling. The benefits ought to outweigh the drawbacks. I do not understand. It seems I do not know enough about adventurers."

His face — which showed no emotion — was a great help, because nobody could tell he was lying. It was the ultimate poker face.

At this point, Ainz stopped for a moment and looked Ainzach straight in the eyes. He could not imply that he was waiting for the man's response.

"What would you do, if it was up to you? Is there a proposal which would be attractive enough to make adventurers who have already picked out a home base change their minds?"

"...Your Majesty, must we start headhunting right now?"

"What?"

"Are we going to start trying to entice the adventurers of the Imperial Capital right away?"

Ainz cupped his chin with a hand as he thought.

If possible, he would like to do so as soon as possible. However, if he could not, he did not mind waiting. After all, the aim was to sing the praises of the Sorcerous Kingdom.

Heteromorphs did not possess the concept of a lifespan. In that sense, there was more than enough time.

"Indeed, it is not particularly urgent."

"Then, should we not lay a strong foundation first? We should build the desired organization within the Sorcerous Kingdom, and then make various other preparations as needed. Once the shell is ready, we can fill it at leisure, is that wrong?"

"That is an excellent suggestion, one which I have considered before. However, it poses a problem of its own. If we do not estimate the contents before we begin to build, the finished vessel may be too large or too small… Would you care to try?"

"In-indeed, that task is beyond me. After all, I remain unsure of how Your Majesty wishes to nurture adventurers, and I do not understand the extent of your plans for the Sorcerous Kingdom."

“Indeed. Frankly speaking, I am still feeling things out. In particular — I know you are interested in my words, but I do not know how many hearts they can move. In order to observe their reactions, I have come to the Empire to attempt a test recruitment, and to see the outcome.”

“I see… as expected of Your Majesty, you have already planned so far ahead. I am ashamed of my shallow thinking.”

“Certainly not. You and I are different beings. Because of that, I might make a mistake when it comes to the reactions of human beings. For all I know, I might say something which upsets others. Please tell me if such a situation occurs. In that respect, I will need a helper… Ainzach.”

“Yes!”

“Then, I’ll be counting on you in the future.”

Ainzach paused to think for about a second, and then he bowed his head deeply.

It looked just like how the Guardians of Nazarick did it.

Ainz graciously nodded as he reflected on his previous words.

In any case, can I really leave the task of appealing to the Empire’s adventurers to Ainzach alone?

This was a very important point.

He could do the presentation himself if need be, but it was not because he particularly liked it. If someone was more adept at a task and more capable, then he should hand it to them. However—

—I can’t leave it all to him. If a problem comes up, I ought to deal with it as his superior.

He did not want to be a bad boss. Ainz clung to that determination. Just then, he realized that Ainzach seemed to have fallen into contemplation.

“Is something wrong?”

“...Your Majesty, could it be that you do not intend to limit yourself to the current crop of adventurers, but to incorporate the adventurers of the future into your organization and have them explore the unknown world?

“That was my intention.”

“With that in mind, I feel trying to persuade the present batch of adventurers will be very difficult. However, it might be possible to have those people who wish to become adventurers come to our Sorcerous Kingdom. That is to say, we will gather the hatchlings and then raise them.”

While adventurers knew no borders, the people who became adventurers belonged to a certain country. Ainz had thought of this point as well, but since this man — who was more familiar with this world than Ainz — shared his opinion, then it should be fine.

“I see. Then, what should we do?”

“The strong have always been admired. Thus, may I ask how your Majesty feels about showing his might as a form of advertisement?”

And what would that accomplish? Ainz thought.

That said, publicity was very important. After all, the reason why he was founding his own Adventurer’s Guild was to spread the name of the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown.

“...So I have to show my might and do what adventurers do?”

All I have to do is make an Empire-brand Momon, then, Ainz thought. However, Ainzach shook his head.

“On that note, Your Majesty. This is the Imperial Capital. How would you feel about displaying your might in the arena?”

“Hoh…? That sounds interesting. Elaborate.”

◆ ◆ ◆

The coach stopped in a spacious courtyard.

Momon and Nabe had walked the streets of the Imperial Capital, but Ainz had never seen such a huge personal home during that time. Not even in E-Rantel had he seen a mansion more impressive than this.

“Is this the home of the arena’s owner? This is quite an impressive place.”

Ainzach’s response to Ainz’s question was along the lines of “That might be stretching it.”

“The arena itself is state property. People rent it for events, so calling them ‘promoters’ might be more accurate. The person who lives here is among the most powerful of those people.”

“I see… a friend of yours?”

It would be good if that was the case. Regretfully, Ainzach shook his head.

“There are many events in the arena, and sometimes adventurers end up fighting monsters. I’ve only met this person a few times, when I captured those monsters and shipped them here.”

“Is that so. Still, it ended up being quite useful indeed, so I must thank you for your connection. That said, what sort of monsters did you capture around the outskirts of E-Rantel?”

Ainzach had an uncomfortable look on his face.

“We captured the undead from the Katze Plains. The undead didn’t need food, so they didn’t incur additional expenses after we captured them.”

“Hoh. Good eye. You do know your stuff, after all.”

“Is that so? I don’t strike myself as a very likeable person… still, Your Majesty. I fear to offend you, but is it really alright to speak of capturing your kind?”

Ainz looked straight at Ainzach.

What on earth was he on about?

“Because they’re undead…”

“Ahh, I see — well, there are many kinds of undead. I do not count all undead as my kin.”

“Forgive my disrespect… Then, may I inquire as to what type of undead Your Majesty might be? If it does not offend, of course.”

“I am an Overlord. Have you heard of them before?”

“My deepest apologies, but I have not. I was not inclined toward my studies, so I do not know.”

Well, that’s to be expected, Ainz thought.

In YGGDRASIL, there were several types of monsters in the Overlord family: the Overlord Wiseman, which was skilled in magic, the Overlord Kronos Master, which could use time-related special abilities, the Overlord General, which was adept at controlling armies of the undead, among others. Even the weakest of those was at least level 80.

He had a rough grasp of the strength of this world and the amount of strength one needed to be considered powerful in this world. That being the case, the appearance of an undead being like an Overlord would cause a huge disturbance, particularly because the undead did not age, so they would continue ruling the land for all eternity until it was defeated.

In other words, the fact that nothing like this had happened implied that there were no Overlords here.

“Is that so. Well, I intend to send adventurers into the unknown reaches of the world to collect information of that sort. It would be quite troublesome if others of my kind were around, bearing a hatred for the living. Do you understand?”

Ainzach's eyes went wide, and he nodded.

"It is as you say. I now thoroughly understand the true nature of adventurers."

"Indeed. Consider me an undead being that is an exception to the rules. I understand the value of humanity, so I will not engage in meaningless slaughter. However, other Overlords might not think the same way, no?"

"Is that really the case?"

"That remains to be seen. I do not know if I am the exception, or if my species is an exception in itself. However, should we not assume the worst-case scenario and prepare accordingly?"

"...It is as Your Majesty says. I shall engrave it into my heart."

Ainzach nodded.

If there were traces of one having appeared, and having being defeated — it might have had some involvement with whoever brainwashed Shalltear. No, one could not rule out an Overlord being dominated the same way Shalltear had been.

"Then, I shall go secure an appointment for the meeting."

"Thank you."

Ainzach got off the coach. After Ainz watched him leave, he took out his mask and put it on. He could go around barefaced in E-Rantel, but this was the Imperial Capital — and he had crossed borders illegally to be here — so at the very least it was better to hide his true face. His robe was also something that was more subdued.

Although it meant that his personal equipment would go down by one class, it could not be helped. After all, Ainz only had one set of divine-class robes. While he still had the things left behind by his friends, in the end, the armor his friends left behind was more customised than their weapons. Therefore, it was not so much that he could not equip them, but that he could not bring out their full power, being that he could not make use of the large amounts of data that were used to benefit their abilities. That being the case, it was still better for Ainz to use the items which had been made for him, even if they were a little weaker.

After swapping out his gear, a knocking came from the door of the carriage, followed by Ainzach's voice.

It would seem less than five minutes had passed.

"My deepest apologies, Your Majesty."

"What happened?

"I regret to say that today does not seem convenient. The other party hopes we can come again tomorrow. However, I believe we can force our way in to convey Your Majesty's words to his ears. What shall we do?"

"There is no need for that."

Forcing an unsolicited meeting during a busy period would not endear anyone to him. On the contrary, when one looked at it from a business' point of view, the very fact that they had come uninvited and not been chased away, but given a time to visit again could be considered a major accomplishment.

"Then, we'll come again tomorrow. Good thing there's been a lot of free time lately — what's wrong?"

Ainz realised Ainzach was goggling at him, and so he asked him why.

"No, it's nothing. I just felt that Your Majesty is a truly generous person… after all, there are those nobles who look down on merchants…"
"And you believed I would insist on a meeting?"

The fact that Ainz did not answer immediately told him "I did believe that" in a way that words could not convey.

Would that be the right thing to do from a ruler's point of view, Ainz wondered. While it seemed a bit too late to think of that now, Ainz Ooal Gown was a king.

If that was what a ruler ought to do, then he needed to do it, even if it seemed strange to Suzuki Satoru.

“This is my first time occupying a position over humans. Should I not do so, if it was appropriate?”

An uncomfortable look appeared on Ainzach’s face again:

“I am unsure, Your Majesty. I have never met the King, so I cannot say if it is true or not. Although, personally speaking, I prefer Your Majesty’s point of view. That said, high-ranking nobles might consider such forcefulness to be appropriate.”

“Human society is so complicated.”

For some reason, Ainzach smiled warmly to Ainz after he muttered that.

“It might well be as Your Majesty says. There are many complicated things indeed.”

Their chuckling filled the coach.

Ainz clenched his right fist where nobody could see. It would seem Ainzach was no longer so guarded. He was sure of it.

“—Then, did you tell him them that I would be coming tomorrow as well?”

“No, I did not do that. I wanted to hear what you thought of it first, Your Majesty. Or am I permitted to use Your Majesty’s name?”

“...It’s fine as long as they are not humans who will make a fuss. Since they are friends of yours, I will leave it to your own discretion.”

“Understood. Then I shall not disclose it for now.”

After discussing details like the time and so on, Ainzach stepped down from the coach again.

Ainz felt a bit guilty about using him as a runner. While he knew this was not a world where seniority mattered, Suzuki Satoru was a working man, and it bothered him to order an older person around.

Now I understand why people dislike having old subordinates.

He would not have had a problem ordering someone around from a completely different company. For instance, if Ainzach was from the Empire, he could point and dictate with no problems at all. The reason why Ainz could not do so was because he had come to see Ainzach as one of his subordinates.

I need to reward him appropriately. The people of Nazarick don't ask for payment, but they're an exception. If I forget this, they'll think of me as a terrible ruler. I must not become the boss of a black-hearted enterprise.

Ainz vowed that to the voice of Herohero in his mind.

Although, when it comes to rewarding Ainzach… how much should I pay him, as a king? The same as a mithril-ranked adventurer? No, there should be a duty allowance as well… so another 5% on top of that? Is there anyone I can ask about how much is appropriate?

He could discuss it with Demiurge or Albedo, but it was unclear whether the two of them had any idea of what kind of payment was appropriate. He had the feeling they would reply with something along the lines of "He should be glad to serve you, Ainz-sama".

As expected… I need to find a wise human. Fluder said he was very confident in his magical knowledge, but knew next to nothing about other matters.

Nazarick was arguably invincible, but he felt uneasy about his lack of knowledge concerning human society.

"...So I'll start by using him until someone better comes along, then? I guess agreeing with Demiurge's proposal was the right choice. Then again, I had no intention of denying him when he brought it up…"
(TL Note: This part is fairly complex; Ainz uses a saying here which refers to taking the first step with something sub-par. However, Ainz has mis-stated one word, going from 隗より始めよ to 貝より始めよ.)

As Ainz drifted off into contemplation once more, someone knocked on the door.

“Forgive the delay, Your Majesty.”

It’s not as though I was waiting for you. However, Ainz decided to allow Ainzach to continue, with a magnanimous attitude that best fitted a ruler.

“As you have desired, the appointment has been made to meet at ten in the morning tomorrow, Your Majesty.”

“Umu. Then, there’s just the matter of waiting until tomorrow… Next, I shall use teleportation magic to send you to E-Rantel. Relax and accept the spell. [Greater Teleportation].”

Ainzach’s body disappeared in an instant.

The [Greater Teleportation] would safely transport him to the outermost of E-Rantel’s triple gates. Even if there was someone at the destination, the spell would deposit him at the nearest safe location, so there was no need to verify the destination with magic.

“Then, I should contact that guy with [Message].”

Ainz muttered to himself. This was a distasteful task, so he did that to pull himself together.

He was sending the [Message] to Fluder, who had offered everything to him. The reason why he had been dragging his feet on giving the man what he had promised was because he did not feel confident he could actually give that old man what he wanted.

Fluder wanted Ainz to teach him everything he knew about magic.

Yet, Ainz’s power did not come from the study of magic.

Perhaps if this was YGGDRASIL, he might be qualified to talk about magic. Sadly, the magic system of this world worked slightly different from that of YGGDRASIL.

Why was it that they learned the same spells in different ways? He had asked himself that question many times, but he could not find an answer. In addition, there was a veritable mountain of other unanswered questions. In the worst-case scenario, he had to consider that he might not be able to use his powers from YGGDRASIL.

Perhaps he could find the answer by using the level-draining option of the super-tier spell [Wish Upon A Star]. In this world, that spell could alter reality itself, and by draining multiple levels, it could fulfil a greater wish.

However, that was a very risky gamble.

It was unknown if he would find the answer even if he used it. It was very likely he would just be wasting effort. More importantly, he was afraid to use a spell which qualified as a trump card. Of course, it would be a different matter if he had a way to obtain large amounts of experience, but sadly, he had not discovered such a way so far.

Although he had no lungs, Ainz went “Haaah~” as he sighed. He had the attitude of a salesman who was prepared to to apologize for failing to deliver the requested goods to a client as he cast the [Message] spell.

“Fluder Paradyne. It is I, Ainz Ooal Gown.”

Once he reached him, he continued speaking the pre-arranged words.

“You were born in Belmous Village. Your earliest contact with magic was through the spellcaster in your village.”

『Ohhhh! It is you, Teacher! Long have I awaited this!』

He could feel the gratitude from Fluder.

Those pre-arranged words were a form of code, because Fluder had said that there was no way to tell if the person on the other side of a [Message] was a friend or a stranger. Thus, they had arranged to verify their identity by mentioning the (already-changed) name of his village and his memory.

Still, even after doing that, Fluder's doubts about the [Message] spell remained.

He's got it pretty bad. That said, there was not much Ainz could do about it.

Ainz made his reply, feeling slightly intimidated by the burning intensity of Fluder's enthusiasm.

"Forgive the slight delay. I believe it is time to teach you magic, as we agreed. Are you free now?"

『Of course! I will make as much time as needed for you, Teacher!』

He wanted to say, "You don't have to try so hard", but Fluder's enthusiasm about magic was the truest expression of his character. In the face of this magic-crazed madman, Ainz could not help but feel a little tongue-tied, as a regular person.

As he considered this great task, which seemed like settling a claim by a difficult customer, his stomach began to ache.

...My stomach must hurt the worst of anyone in the Imperial Capital.

Still, he could not delay it any further.

Before teleporting to Fluder's room, Ainz decided to verify his destination with a divination spell.

"All right. I shall now cast [Greater Teleportation] to reach your chambers."

『Ohhh! Not [Teleportation], but [Greater Teleportation]! Dare I ask which tier of magic it belongs to?』

"...Let's leave that for later. The [Message] will not last forever. Neither do I have levels in commander-type classes… Still, I would like to ask you something before that. What sort of anti-divination countermeasures have you taken? What spells have you cast? How did you cast them? Did you do anything to ward against teleportation?"

『None, none at all, I have not taken any such measures.』

Ainz's non-existent brows twitched as Fluder replied.

"Isn't doing nothing at all a little careless…?"

In other words, everything he said in Fluder's room might well be leaked to a third party.

『My sincerest apologies. However, I am not adept in that field of magic.』

"In that case, you should use magic items to substitute for that, right? I have seen many magic items in the Imperial Capital, all purportedly made by you."

Ainz recalled what he had seen when he first came to the Imperial Capital. He had been startled by the fact that they had things like refrigerators on sale.

『It is as you say, but as you must surely know, one must know a related spell in order to make a magic item. For instance, one must know the [Fireball] spell to make a flaming weapon. However, only a few people are willing to learn anti-divination spells...』

"I see," Ainz muttered.

In YGGDRASIL, one could normally only learn three spells per level. A level 20 character would thus be able to learn a maximum of 60 spells. It would be quite difficult to incorporate anti-divination magic into such a limited selection of spells.

Perhaps those who were not in the know might think 60 was a sizable sum, but if Ainz was limited to 60 spells from the 3rd tier of magic, he would probably have to spend all day worrying over his choices.

This was because he had to consider future uses, whether or not he would change his class and so on. There were many things which needed to be planned for and anticipated .

From that point of view, his rebuke of Fluder was petty and sad.

“Indeed, I misspoke. It is as you say. Divination magic would necessarily be a lower priority when studying offensive and defensive spells.”

In the game, he could say, “I’ll learn this, so I’ll leave that to you” and easily settle things. However, the choice of spells was a life-changing decision to the people of this world. It would take a very brave person to learn an unpopular spell.

In addition, the divination school of spells was quite deep. One needed to anticipate the means that the foe would use to collect information.

Simply put, becoming a divination specialist was something which one would stake their lives on.

“Alright. Then I shall give you the anti-divination item I possess. Use that to ward yourself in future.”

『Yes！』

Even without looking, he could tell that Fluder’s head was deeply lowered. For all he knew, he might even be genuflecting.

『I have certainly received your loving words, Teacher!』

Ainz had originally planned to give him a decent item, but the thought of that pained his heart.

“Ah, ahhh… Then I shall scry your room now.”

Ainz cast his spell on Fluder’s chambers.

He looked down upon the genuflecting Fluder.

Then, he decided to check for magical auras, and as expected of Fluder, there were many different colors in his room. However, none of them looked like a dangerous color which would impede teleportation. After verifying that, he cast [Greater Teleportation].

His field of view changed, showing that he had successfully teleported to Fluder's room. Though there had been no delays, and he did not sense anyone spying on him, and he was quite certain that he had not jumped into the enemy's base, he still took a quick look around himself.

In truth, there was no need to be so worried. However the brief period of vulnerability after teleportation was when it was easiest to be attacked. These protective actions — to defend against being PKed — had been long drilled into Suzuki Satoru's body.

"I bid you welcome, my Teacher."

"...Raise your head," Ainz commanded Fluder. In all honesty, there was no need for him to go that far.

That sort of loyalty — or rather, his thirst for knowledge that led to a desire to obey — was abnormal.

It was quite similar to how the people of Nazarick acted. Although Ainz had finally started getting used to that sort of thing, seeing it from someone he barely knew made him want to back away.

"Yes!"

"Speaking while standing is not good. I'll take a seat."

"Yes! Everything I have is yours, Teacher. Please, sit anywhere you like!"

Complex feelings of whether or not to get used to this ran through Ainz's heart as he sat on the sofa. However, Fluder did not take the seat opposite him. Instead, he remained as he was, kneeling on the ground with his head raised.

"It's fine. Have a seat."

"Is, is it really alright? That is, for me to sit in the same way as you, Teacher."

"...You should have disciples too, right? Do you treat them this way as well?"

This sort of sports-team attitude alarmed Ainz, which prompted his question. In response, Fluder shook his head.

"Not like that, but the difference between myself and you is like that between the heavens and the earth, Teacher. I fear to even begin to mention myself in the same breath as—"

"—It's fine. I grant you permission to sit down. Come. have a seat."

"Yes!"

After he made sure Fluder was seated, Ainz thought, *my belly really hurts* as he spoke.

"First, how is the matter that I as—"

He changed his mind halfways through the word "asked".

"—that I *ordered* you to handle? That is to say, making a written record of the Empire's information on the various countries?"

"Yes! Most of the information pertaining to the neighboring countries has already been completed. However—"

"What happened? Is there a problem?"

"Yes! Or rather, I should say, as expected of the Emperor."

A look of pride crossed his face. It was the expression a teacher might have toward an outstanding pupil.

"He seems to have noticed my treachery."

It was only natural for employees to swear not to reveal their former company's secrets before job-hopping. With that in mind, Ainz was a villain for making Fluder feed him sensitive information on the Empire.

However, Ainz knew well that he did not run a company, but a country. Nothing was off-limits for the sake of his nation's prosperity — for the happiness of the people who belonged to the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.

Ainz held no grudge against Jircniv. However, that meant nothing in comparison to the well-being of his own country. If his misfortune made the Sorcerous Kingdom prosper, then he would simply have to suffer.

That said, Ainz still preferred coexistence and mutual prosperity over conflict.

Punitto Moe once said something about Mr. Nash and prisoner's conditions and something along those lines, but the gist of it was, if opportunities were unlimited, cooperation would reap the greatest benefits for all parties involved.
(TL Note: Ainz is getting it wrong again - see Nash Equilibrium and the Prisoner's Dilemma)

Ainz knew that international relations were basically a matter of each party using the other, but he wanted to maintain a good relationship with Jircniv.

I kept the number of Imperial casualties to a minimum as the price of poaching Fluder, so we're probably even on that count. I feel a sense of closeness to him now. It must be because of all the times I've spied on him.

"...Is something the matter, Teacher?"

"Er, um, nothing. Just thinking about certain matters."

"Really? My deepest apologies for interrupting your thoughts, Teacher!"

"There's no need to apologise. I am here today because of you."

"Ohhh! Thank you very much, Teacher!"

Why is he thanking me so vigorously? Though Ainz was puzzled, he eventually managed to get the topic back on track.

“Ah— yes, the fact that you’ve been turned. Well, it’s alright for you to be exposed, but there is a problem. That is to say, your safety.”

“Ohh! To think you would actually be worried about the safety of someone like me, Teacher!”

Why did this old man have to overreact to everything? The basic duty of a boss was to look out for the well-being of anyone he did not intend to discard from the beginning. Or did they do things differently in the Empire?

If it’s the latter, that would be scary… Well, I might kill people who got in my way, but killing someone who was once my subordinate is still...

“Fluder, that’s right, do not get too excited. It would be odd if anyone around you noticed.”

“That will not be a problem. This floor is exclusively for my use. Nobody else is around.”

He had come here before. That said, this tower was quite large, so it was no wonder the greatest magic caster of the Empire was allowed an entire floor to himself.

“Back to the matter of your personal safety. Has anyone tried to kill you after your treachery came to light?”

“Nothing of the sort. However, my responsibilities have steadily decreased, and while the Emperor frequently came to consult me in the past, he has not summoned me ever since he returned from the glorious domain that you rule, Teacher.”

“I see… Then, Fluder. Do you want to come to my side?”

“Ohhh! Gladly!”

He answered right away...

“Then, after considering your profession — no, before that, there is something I must do. It concerns your reward.”

After saying that, Ainz exhaled, and then reached into his pocket dimension. He had rehearsed the flow of the conversation which would follow many times, poking fun at the words even as he corrected them.

Although he had no way to be sure if Fluder would react as Ainz imagined, he had put in enough practice already.

“As agreed, I shall now impart a portion of my knowledge to you. Take and study this book.”

Ainz handed a tome called The Book of the Dead to him.

It was a fairly ancient volume, which gave off a musty smell. Surprisingly enough, the book itself was very sturdy, with no trace of being worm-eaten.

Fluder accepted the book Ainz offered with trembling hands. Ainz was glad that he was undead. If he was still human, the book might be wobbling nonstop from nervousness.

Fluder’s goal was to plumb the abyss of magic, but Ainz did not know what the abyss of magic was. He could teach him about YGGDRASIL, but the abyss of magic or whatnot was another topic entirely.

That said, not giving it to him would be a betrayal of his loyalty. One had to repay good unto good and reward loyal service. Thus, Ainz had given him a book from his collection, which seemed the most likely to hold the secrets of magical knowledge. The parts he had flipped through seemed to contain something about magic which he could not understand.

“Then, please excuse me.”

Fluder reached out to the book, and that delighted expression of his soon twisted into despair after flipping though a few pages.

“—What’s the matter? Is this not what you sought?”

Ainz suppressed his unease as he asked that question. It was fine even if it was not what he wanted. He had already practiced for that eventuality.

"No, it is nothing like that. I simply cannot understand this."

"Ah, I see."

Ainz took the book from Fluder, flipped through it, and stopped at a certain page.

"This chapter concerns the transformation of the dead into souls; specifically, the section about differentiation."

It was written in Japanese, so obviously Fluder could not understand it. However —

This looks more like a setting book for a fantasy world than a fantasy novel. The hell is this differentiation stuff. And then there's souls as clouds and so on. It looks really hard and I can't wrap my brain around it at all. Feels like I can only scratch the surface… Could it be that I can't understand this book, even though I can read it?

Books were like the occult, or rather, this book was pretty much an occult volume. To Suzuki Satoru, who had no knowledge in this field, all he saw was a collection of scribblings. Still, all this seemed to have been taken from some kind of mythology. If Tabula Smaragdina was around, he would probably be able to explain it to him.

"Ohhh!"

The sense of guilt in Ainz's heart grew as he watched Fluder look at him with joyful eyes.

"Indeed… Well, I cannot give this to you because I only have one set, but give this a try."

Ainz placed a pair of glasses on the book and handed it to him. Fluder put it on and hurriedly flipped through the pages.

“This, this is! It’s saying that souls are entities like the foam left by the waves of this great world, and so whether great or small, they are fundamentally the same. That meeeeaaaannnns!!!”

Hieh~ he’s gone mad.

Even Ainz was startled, to the point where he nearly shrank back.

The way Fluder’s eyes were wide open and bloodshot, his breathing like a wild beast’s, made it seem as though he was about to pounce on someone.

“How, how is it?”

Fluder’s eyes pivoted and stared straight at Ainz.

“This, this is amazing, Teacher! This is the lore that I soooooooooooouuuuught! Hyaaaaah!”

The alarm he felt at the old man’s mania exceeded a predetermined threshold, and Ainz swiftly calmed down again.

“—Is that so. Then, return me the glasses.”

“Wha! But, this..”

“Consider the translation of that book to be your training. Once you can understand and digest it, you will be able to set foot in a higher domain. It would be pointless for you to use these glasses.”

“How could this be… Then, may I be allowed to give this book a once-over first?”

“One page should still be all right. But if you continue after that, it will negatively affect your growth.”

Fluder closed the book shut with a *patan*, and then closed his eyes.

After several seconds, he opened his eyes and spoke. His voice had returned to normal.

"Understood. I will abide by your teachings, oh Teacher. May I seek your aid if there are matters I do not understand?"

"Umu. As long as it is within my power to answer."

"Yes!"

Fluder removed the glasses and returned them to Ainz.

Excellent! I won't hear anything from Fluder for a while now. Ah, I need to instruct him about this first. That… how shall I say this...

Ainz struggled to pry open the vaults of his memory. Then, in solemn, heavy tones — which made one think of the voice a leader would have — Ainz spoke:

"Fluder."

"Yes!!"

"I have entrusted you with this book of arcana because I trust you. You must never hand it to a third party. The same applies to any notes you make to study it. Nothing about this book can be allowed to spread."

"Yes!!!"

"There is hardly a need to tell you the reason for that, but this is knowledge that surpasses what humans can comprehend. It would be very troublesome if others came to learn of it… Although someone of your talent might not be beyond salvation. I do not want to have to clean up behind you ten years down the road."

"But of course. I will not leak any of the knowledge I have obtained from you to others. I swear it."

"—I trust you, Fluder. Do not disappoint me."

"Yes!!!!"

Fluder got up from his chair and knelt on the ground.

He wanted to say that there was no need to go to that extent, but this too was proof of how effective his air of majesty had been. Ainz could not help but feel proud that his hours of acting and vocalization practice had been put to good use.

“Enough. Since you understand, I shall say no more. Return to your seat. Still, it will be very difficult for you to decipher an unknown language without any help. Do you have some way of overcoming that?”

“Yes! I can use a translation spell, though its efficacy is very limited. I believe that with that, I can slowly decipher the text.”

“Really now. Really now! Marvellous.”

This answer was exactly what Ainz wanted to hear. By slowly giving him the appropriate practice, he would be able to buy himself time. In addition, a problem like that would not be enough to make Fluder give up.

“Then I shall hand this to you… no, that’s it. I will lend you a box for you to store it in. I do not think that you will treat it lightly, but someone might wish to steal it from you.”

Ainz pulled a box out of his pocket space. It was an item of the same grade which he used to store his personal notebook.

“Once you store the book in here, even if this box is stolen, it will take quite some time to open it. Of course, it will all be for nothing if someone overhears the command word to open the box… so be careful.”

“Of course, Teacher! I will never do anything like that!”

“Good.”

Ainz shifted his gaze from Fluder — who was caressing the book in delight — to the ceiling. Now, what would he talk about next?

“Ah, that’s right. The matter of your treachery coming to light, and thus you coming over to me. When can you leave?”

“If Teacher wishes it, I can leave at any time. I have no attachments to this country.”

Ainz mentally furrowed his brows.

He had no idea what to say to someone who could casually discard his position of trust. He might well do the same thing to Ainz in the future.

Ainz marked Fluder down several points with a red pen in his heart’s ledger.

“...Then, Fluder. I wish to have you participate in the magical research of the Sorcerous Kingdom. However, your spells will not be put into circulation. They will only be shared with me and those whom I trust. Can you bear it? Can you forsake your desire for fame?”

“There will be no problem at all. The only thing I desire is to glimpse the secrets of magic. I desire nothing else.”

Ainz studied Fluder in earnest, the man who could make such a statement.

Ainz had no ability to evaluate a person’s character. As human beings, it was obvious that Fluder — a genius sage who had lived far beyond the span of a normal human being and who was deeply involved in the operations of the vast nation called the Empire — was superior to him. There was no way for him to see through any attempt by Fluder to deceive him.

However, being unable to see through such things and not trying to see through such things were two different matters. With that attitude in mind, Ainz stared at Fluder, and in the end he simply said, “Good.”

“I will entrust you with all the powers and privileges of your office once you arrive in the Sorcerous Kingdom. I also intend to help you with magical research as much as possible. Then—”

Now, there would be one more person helping Nazarick, beyond the Bareares. If he could obtain the woman which Demiurge and Albedo had recommended, Nazarick would be further strengthened.

He had to increase his power as much as possible, so long as he could not see the true face of his enemy.

The enemy possessed a World-Class Item, so he had to obtain a power aside from YGGDRASIL's as soon as possible. He had to assume that anything he could do, the enemy could as well.

However, there was one more problem.

That would be, how would he protect the Empire.

Demiurge felt that the Empire was a potential enemy, but Ainz did not think so.

Although the future was unclear, the use of force alone in world conquest was not a wise decision. If the Sorcerous Kingdom was painted as a nation which annihilated everyone who stood against it, countries which could have been friends would probably end up as enemies.

That being the case, why not form a deep friendship with his fellow dictator Jircniv, and send that message to their subordinates?

This way, I'll be able to minimize the force Demiurge and the others use in world conquest. What a brilliant plan. More than the alliance of nations, or the alliance of guilds… friendship?

The shapes of his heteromorphic friends appeared in Ainz's mind.

Still, how should I make friends with him? Giving people things isn't the right way to make friends, right… Thus, protecting the Empire, the most precious thing to Jircniv, should be the best way. It's quite likely that my enemies will set their sights upon it.

He put himself in the role of the people who brainwashed Shalltear. If they used the methods Ainz used, then—

In the worst-case scenario, they might use [Ia Shub-Niggurath] on the Imperial Capital. Everyone would think I did it, regardless of the actual culprit… Then, they would spread that news throughout the world. That would greatly decrease the Sorcerous Kingdom's influence.

Ainz recalled his YGGDRASIL days.

It was foolish to directly fight a powerful guild, so it was quite common to instigate wars with other guilds to weaken the powerful guild's influence. These methods would probably be applicable here. Ainz would probably do so if placed in that situation, and so it was very likely his foe would do the same thing.

In order to prevent this sort of thing from happening, Ainz considered allowing Fluder to spread rumors that he could not use that spell again (a lie, naturally). However, Fluder could no longer be used, so he had to consider some other method.

This is close to forbidding the carrying of palm-sized dangerous objects… As expected, I'll need to discuss the matter with Demiurge, maybe order him to think of a way to deal with this. However, would he not think it strange? Ahh, how troublesome, I can't figure it out.

If only he could hand everything to those two. However, if he did that, it would damage his image as an absolute ruler. He had to think of a way to solve his problems while maintaining his position.

"Teacher, what is wrong?"

"...Fluder, I intend to protect the Empire for some time. Do you have any ideas?"

"...May I know why you ask?"

"Conquering it would be easy, but I have no interest in standing atop a pile of rubble. I wish to keep the Empire intact, and so I would like to prevent the loss of fighting power that would result when they lose you."

Fluder’s wrinkles deepened.

“It is difficult to answer that question immediately. I believe that there will be no problems for a while even if I am not around. That said, it is also true that nobody can fill the void that I will leave… If it is fine, then I shall stay for the time being.”

“Are you willing to do so? Then, I will contact you again tomorrow, after the discussions are complete.”

“Yes!”

“Right, there are two more things I want to ask you. First, I would like to know the details of the Martial Lord. The second matter concerns Death Knights…”

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As the appointed time drew near, Ainz cast a detection spell. Normally, he would have stacked numerous defensive spells on himself first, but it would be too wasteful to expend a lot of valuable scrolls. Unlike how things were at the graveyard, when he was sure there were hostiles present, Ainz simply cast the spell.

That said, he picked a place where any counterattacks would not strike others.

A different scene appeared in his field of vision. This was the interior of a coach. Ainz manipulated the floating point of view and observed the exterior of the coach.

Then, Ainz cast [Greater Teleportation].

The teleport took place without incident, and Ainz opened the door to the coach. Ainzach, who was seated within, had a look of shock on his face. However, Ainz nonchalantly boarded, closed the door, and dispelled the invisibility spell he had cast on himself.

“As I thought, it was Your Majesty. Although I understand the need for secrecy, could you please not use an invisibility spell next time?

“If I do not use invisibility, I will be spotted, no?”

“It should be fine because of Your Majesty’s mask, am I wrong?

“Indeed, that might be the case, but I used a teleportation spell. I would like to avoid being drawn into troublesome matters.”

“Indeed…”

“Well, since you understand, shall we leave?”

“All right. Let us depart.”

The coach passed through the opened gate, and reached the place designated by the doorman. This was a parking area which could accommodate several coaches.

“Then, let us proceed.”

Ainz dismounted from the coach after Ainzach.

An old man in a butler’s uniform awaited them there. He was accompanied by a maid.

Though he looked like a butler, he did not feel as powerful as Sebas. He seemed like a very ordinary, albeit well-bred old man. The butler was human, though the same was not true for the maid.

A pair of ears adorned the top of the maid’s head; not human ears, but ears from some kind of animal. Although it was hard to be sure since they were obscured by her hair, there was no swelling at the site where normal humans had their ears. She had a cute face, but it was not the same way a human being was cute — more like an animal sort of cute.

“Welcome, Ainzach-sama and — Your Majesty the Sorcerer King, I believe. The master awaits you. Please allow us to lead the way. May I ask you to follow behind us?”

“Wha?!”

After he heard the butler’s speech, a strangled cry of surprise escaped Ainzach’s mouth.

Ainzach had said in yesterday’s talk that he would not bring up Ainz’s true identity, so he must have been shocked because they had managed to guess who Ainz was. For Ainz, however, this was nothing to be alarmed about. His mask might have concealed his face, but he had not changed his clothes. Anyone with a good information network would have heard about him. Under these circumstances, not replying would be rude.

“Thank you. Then, please show us the way.”
“Yes.”

The butler lowered his head. A beat later, so did the maid.

After the two of them started walking, Ainzach quietly told Ainz:

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty.”

His thanks was because Ainz had responded to the butler.

No need for that, Ainz wanted to say, but in the end he accepted the thanks in silence.

To Suzuki Satoru, a superior ought to cover for his subordinates if the latter made a mistake. Ainzach’s thanks was a natural reaction. It was an unavoidable step in his future growth as one of Ainz’s subordinates.

Once more, Ainz keenly realized that being a boss was not relaxing at all.

Suddenly, Ainz realized that he had never once said “Thanks” while he was playing the role of a ruler.

I need to find a time to thank the Guardians and all the NPCs. I need to show my appreciation for their hard work.

Ainz's objective was to run the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick like a benevolent company. As he idly pondered the matter, he did not stop moving, but continued walking toward the direction where he was being led.

"Although, it was quite surprising to actually encounter a Rabbit Man, Your Majesty."

Wouldn't it be better to discuss this sort of thing after the person in question was gone? Ainz thought that, but the topic interested him, so he decided to go with the flow.

"Shouldn't it be Rabbit Woman?"

"No… well… their species name is Rabbit Man."

"Ainzach, it was merely a joke. Taking it so seriously is somewhat troubling."

"...I wonder if she came from further east than the City-State Alliance. How exotic."

"Hm…"

Ainz had no idea how far away "east of the City-State Alliance" was. His information did not yet cover such distant regions.

Still, he had not seen any in the Kingdom, and she was the only Rabbit Man he had encountered in the Imperial Capital. It must be hard to live in a place without other members of one's kind, even without considering discrimination from other races.

Ainz was curious and wanted to ask her some questions, but he could not do so. It would be troublesome if he stepped on a landmine during their conversation.

Before long, they reached a house.

“The master awaits you within. Please.”

The interior of the house was decorated with many articles of lovingly-oiled and maintained weapons and armor. They were clean, free of dust and displayed in neat rows.

Upon closer inspection, many of the weapons were scuffed and dented on their business ends. It was clear that these weapons had been used in actual combat.

Rather than a weapon merchant’s shop display, it seemed more like the gallery owner displaying the weapons of his glorious past.

After a hasty glance around, Ainz’s gaze returned to the sword he saw first.

It was the most beautiful of all the weapons in the room.

There was no sign of damage on the sword. The gallery’s owner must have been quite fond of it, judging by how it had been placed to be the first thing anyone would see when they entered the room.

“Does it please you?”

“Ah, truly an excellent collection.”

Thus did Ainz answer the room’s owner seated on the sofa — in other words, the owner of this gallery. The owner was stout-bodied and his hair was cut so short that one could see his scalp.

They did not bother with greetings, but continued talking about weapons.

“So, which piece do you favor most — ah, that one. Everyone who comes into this room says that.”

Ainz entered the room and stood before the sword.

“May I pick it up?”

“Of course, by all means.”

Ainz thanked him and picked up the sword. Of course, it would drop if he actually tried to wield it in earnest, but holding it was fine.

He peered at the sword, and then he noticed the characters carved on the blade. These bizarre characters were vaguely familiar to Ainz. He searched his memories, and finally found the answer.

“Runes?”

“Ohhh! As expected of Your Majesty. You know of these letters!”

What? Seriously? ...Are runes commonly used in this world?

Runes were an alphabet which had apparently been used in the past of Suzuki Satoru’s world. The fact that such characters existed in this world meant that it was very likely someone from the same world as Suzuki Satoru had spread them here. Thus, Ainz carefully answered:

“...Probably, I believe. I only know of them. I cannot create rune-engraved items. May I know which smith made this?”

“Ohhh, that was a good question. That sword was forged by a runesmith of the Dwarven Kingdom in the Azellisian Mountain Range. It is about 150 years old. The blade can accumulate electricity, and there’s a maker’s mark on the hilt. Did you see it?”

The gallery owner was standing next to Ainz.

The overwhelming smell of cologne assaulted his nose.

“This is a piece by Stonenel, a famous artisan.”

A Dwarven artisan? ...Looks like I’ll have to learn more about that.

“Hoh. That does sound like a famous artisan. Are there any more examples of his work here?”

Ainz looked around, and the man laughed heartily.

“Hahahaha. No, not in here. I store them elsewhere. However, this is the only piece which bears such a powerful enchantment.”

“Hoh.”

Ainz concealed his disappointment as he quietly emoted.

That said, he had still learned something about the artisan called Stonenel. He had to see if there was a player there.

“I’ve heard that the weapons made by dwarven runesmiths rarely circulate on the market. And you actually have more of them in store?”

Ainz gave Ainzach a mental thumbs-up for asking that question.

“Indeed I do, Ainzach,” the man smiled. “I snatch them up whenever they’re on auction. Recently, there was a really persistent adventurer trying to outbid me. I ended up paying three times what I had originally planned.”

Ainzach shook his head incredulously (sort of), while Ainz nodded in approval. This was how things were for a collector. An outsider would never be able to understand. At times, even Ainz did not understand the actions of his past self.

Ainz wanted to keep asking, but in the end he decided to return the sword to its original place.

“It seems I was entranced by your marvellous collection without even greeting you. Do forgive my lack of respect.”

The man was all smiles.

“Your Majesty has a way with words. Then, allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Osk, an insignificant merchant.”

“You will surely anger the other merchants of the Empire if you call yourself insignificant. I remain the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown.”

“Not a day goes by when I do not hear of your mighty name. Please, have a seat. I will have the servants prepare drinks.”

“...While this is a rare opportunity… there is no need to prepare my share.”

Osk’s eyes did not seem quite proportional to his head. He studied Ainz with those eyes.

“Your Majesty, I have heard the rumors… but could I trouble you to remove that mask?”

“...Since this is a request of the home’s owner, I must comply.”

Ainz took off his mask, revealing his bare face.

There was no look of surprise on Osk’s face. His eyes were very small, so once he narrowed his eyes to smile, there was no way to look into their depths.

“Ohhh… I see, I see…”

Osk nodded several times before speaking again.

“In truth, I was worried that I would not be able to prepare tea that would be able to satisfy the tastes of the renowned Sorcerer King, but it would seem that was wasted effort on my part.”

After those cheerful words, Osk’s belly wobbled with laughter.

“Say, Osk. Why did you think His Majesty would come with me?”

“Ahhh, it’s not hard to tell, right? E-Rantel is under the control of His Majesty. When I heard that the Guildmaster of E-Rantel’s Adventurer’s Guild was visiting, in the company of someone more important than himself, only one person came to mind. Granted, it could have been some other confidant of the Sorcerer King, but my instincts told me otherwise,” Osk said.

“Then, is it my turn to ask questions now? Did you once use the weapons displayed here?”

Osk chuckled at Ainz's question.

"How could that be? Your Majesty, do consider my body! I can wield an abacus, but I have never once swung a sword. That is just a hobby of mine… Since I was a child, I have always admired the strong, as well as swords and other weapons."

"I see…"

"It seems you understand. Now then, I have a question of my own. I have heard of Your Majesty's unstoppable might; was that due to the long time you have lived — well, I suppose it does count as living?"

"That is correct, in comparison to the lifespans of you humans."

As Ainz said this, he thought of something. What kind of being was the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown?

Obviously he could not say, "Certainly not, you two are older than me." Even if he did say so, they would not believe him. So he had to speak while in-character as the Sorcerer King. However, if he did not lock down the exact details of the Sorcerer King's character, things might turn out badly.

In any case, it's confirmed that the undead live a long time. If anyone asks why I do not know certain things despite my long life, I can reply that I was focused on researching magic. Let's use that as a basic detail for the Sorcerer King's character.

"That being the case, do you possess weapons of the past?"

Judging by that question, Osk did not intend to hide his curiosity.

"Of course I do. However, I cannot just give them to you, no?"

"For a suitable amount — no, I will try to pay three times the market value."

Ainz could not reject him on the spot. This was because he recalled the precarious state of his personal finances. However, it would hardly be dignified for the ruler of a country to go "Sure, let's do it."

“...Money does not exactly appeal to me.”

“I sincerely apologize. Saying so to Your Majesty — who is the ruler of a country — was terribly rude of me… Then, what can I offer to make you want to trade them to me?”

So he wants to phrase it as receiving a bounty for meritorious service to my country, or something like that? Hm? Well, in that case...

Ainz took out a shortsword. It was wreathed in a billowing mist effect. Its faintly translucent blue blade was made of blue crystal metal, and it contained little mana. That said, its overall ability classified it as a high-class item in YGGDRASIL, and it was certainly more powerful than the average magic item in this world.

“This, this is!”

Two voices cried out those words.

Ainzach’s eyes went wide as he stared at the shortsword. “Umu,” Ainz muttered, before placing it in front of Ainzach.

“Take it.”

“Hah?!”

Once more, those words were spoken by two voices.

“Ainzach, this is a gift for your hard work. That said, this is not an award, nor is this meant to symbolize your station, I simply felt that this sort of thing is similar to the reward I wish to hand out in my ideal nation, so I give this to you. If you require cash instead, it is fine to sell it off.”

This shortsword did not contain enough data to harm Ainz. Nor was it one of the weapons made by his former guildmates and thus filled with memories.

“I, how could I dare accept such…”

Ainzach's body shuddered uncontrollably.

"This is nothing amazing. Well, if you do not want it, I can change it for something else when the time comes. A healing potion, perhaps. That should be fine. What do you think?"

Ainzach hesitated for a while, but in the end he decided to keep the shortsword.

"I shall accept it. Thank you very much, Your Majesty! I will continue serving Your Majesty with all my strength, with effort that will not be outshone by this sword!"

"Congratulations, Ainzach. If you run into any trouble, remember to think of this friend of yours."

Osk eyed the shortsword as he said this. Ainzach had a look on his face like a mother bear protecting her cubs.

"It won't happen. Never."

Ainz decided to change his tone.

"Well then. Let us move on to the real business."

Osk reluctantly pulled his eyes away from the handkerchief that Ainzach had used to wrap the sword, and replied:

"...Understood. May I ask why you have graced my humble estate with your presence?"

"Umu… I am not given to dressing up my words. Let me get to the point…. I would like you to arrange a bout with the Martial Lord of the arena."

Osk's eyes widened, but soon they returned to their normal shape.

"I have heard that the Martial Lord is not part of the arena personnel, but a gladiator you have raised since he was a child. Ainzach told me that you can quickly put a fight on the cards if you agree to have the Martial Lord fight, which is why I came to make this request of you."

"Fuhahahaha. Are you serious, Your Majesty? You do know that the Martial Lord is the mightiest man in the arena, with a monster's body and outstanding fighting skills? He might be the strongest one in history. Perhaps Your Majesty counts strong individuals among his followers as well, but defeating him is…"

Osk shook his head with pride.

"...Is he stronger than Fluder?"

"No, this is from the perspective of a warrior. It's not applicable to a magic caster. All they have to do is fly up and attack repeatedly with magic and that's the end of it."

Osk's quiet grumbling somewhat perturbed Ainz, and then Ainzach chimed in:

"Once, an adventurer team took to the sky and won by raining spells and arrows on him from a distance. That was a pretty disappointing fight. Ever since, the arena has forbidden teleportation and flight magic."

Then, Osk looked at Ainz. He seemed to have recovered.

"Cough! Well, that was rude of me, Your Majesty. I recalled some bitter memories… Then, back to the topic, Your Majesty. May I ask who intends to fight the Martial Lord? Are they human?"

Ainz and Ainzach looked at each other. Then, Ainz answered:

"That would be me."

"...Eh?!"

"I, Ainz Ooal Gown, shall be his opponent."

After a brief period of silence, Osk asked in a panic:

"But, but but, but are you not the ruler of a country, Your Majesty?"

“Indeed I am. What of it?”

“Eh? No, that’s correct, but… that…”

“Ahh, I understand what worries you. You must be thinking, what would happen if I came to be hurt?”

“It would be fine if it ended in just getting hurt,” Osk muttered under his breath. Ainz pretended not to notice.

“Be at ease. There will not be a problem, no matter what happens to me. I will leave written proof of that.”

“But if that sort of thing does happen, I won’t be able to do business any more. I have heard that the Empire is supposed to be an ally of the Sorcerous Kingdom. If I allow the king of an allied country to be seriously injured, the state will have its eye on me.”

“I promise you — you will not be inconvenienced by this.”

“Even if you say so…” Osk paused to think, and then asked again: “These words might be unpleasant to the ear, but could you offer up something as a guarantee?”

“A guarantee? Like what?”

“...Please give me something like what you gave Ainzach earlier. If anything happens, it’ll be fine as long as I can keep that item.”

“If that is what it takes to satisfy you, then I shall make that promise. However, I cannot give it to you right away. I promise it will reach you by tomorrow.”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty. ...There is also another matter I would like to ask, though I fear it is inappropriate.”

Ainz waved, indicating that Osk should continue.

"As a promoter, I collect a lot of information. Much of that information pertains to powerful beings which might appear in the arena, or monsters. There are also rumors concerning Your Majesty — dare I ask if it is true that Your Majesty slew tens of thousands of the Kingdom's people with a single spell?"

"Koff!"

Ainzach coughed in a very contrived way. He was glaring at Osk with reproachful eyes, but this was nothing that had to be hidden, nor was it something to be ashamed of.

"Indeed, that is true. I slew them with my magic. Will you reproach me for it?"

"No, I was simply asking to gauge the extent of Your Majesty's mystical powers. After all, if you did use that spell from the rumors, it would be… very bad. After all, the arena is within the Imperial Capital."

"No, no, I will not cast a spell like that."

Even Ainz had no intention of using such a spell in the middle of an allied country. What kind of terrorist would do that sort of thing?

"Of course, I feel the same way as well. Unlike the common image of the undead, Your Majesty is a noble and rational man. I do not believe you will enact a great slaughter because you hate the living. That said, making assumptions and neglecting to confirm these things might lead to failure."

Ainz agreed on that point as well. This was one of the dangers that came with allowing a new person to join. In truth, Suzuki Satoru had failed like this in the past.

"Your concerns are valid. Allow me to repeat myself — I will not use that spell."

"Why is that? Is it because it has something to do with the alignment of the stars?"

"While that is not related to the mat-"

A lightbulb went off over Ainz's head.

"Well, that spell is one of my most powerful trump cards. Because El-Nix-dono desired it, I went out of my way to cast that grand spell, which I can only use once every ten years. Thus, for the next decade, I must conserve my strength."

"Hoh!" A strange gleam lit up Osk's eyes. "Is it really alright to tell me that? After all, this might be considered to be a weakness of Your Majesty…"

"It is fine. I may not be able to use a destructive spell like that, but slaughtering any fools who oppose me is still easy. After all, it does not mean I cannot use other spells."

"As expected of Your Majesty. In other words, the Martial Lord will also be an easy opponent; is that what you are implying?"

After Ainz nodded with confidence, a smile lit up Osk's face. However, when Ainz studied him, he could not be sure if the smile was genuine.

"I see. Finally, please allow me one more question. Why do you want to fight the Martial Lord, Your Majesty?"

"Because I have heard that he is a powerful foe… I wish to know who is stronger, between him and Gazef Stronoff. There was Gazef in the Kingdom, so perhaps the greatest reason is because I want to know who is his equivalent in the Empire."

Of course, that was not why Ainz was fighting. However, it was the reason he and Ainzach had agreed upon after discussing the matter.

It would have been fine to state the real reason, but Osk was not a trustworthy person. In truth, he seemed like the sort who prioritised his own gains. Ainz felt that being honest with him would not end well.

"I understand. Thank you very much… Then, I shall schedule the fight with the Martial Lord. However—"

Osk raised his hand to interrupt Ainz's thanks.

“I hope you will abide by the rules of the arena. In addition, while Your Majesty might be taking the match with the Martial Lord seriously, it is still a performance of sorts for us. Thus, an overly one-sided fight would be terribly boring. With that in mind, I would like to request that Your Majesty not use magic, and that you will use a sword — a weapon — to battle the Martial Lord. I submit that these conditions should make for a good fight.”

“What are you saying?!”

Ainzach sprang up from his seat. His face was red from anger.

“Is that even possible?! His Majesty is a magic caster! How do you expect him to win?!”

“Hoho. Indeed, that is the case. There would be no way for His Majesty the Sorcerer King to win once his magic was sealed. My my, to think I actually brought up such a sensible matter. Still, I did not expect to hear these words from your mouth. I would have expected you to be alright with His Majesty losing. It seems my opinion of you has changed.”

“You—!”

“Ainzach, don’t get too worked up. It is fine.”

“...Your Majesty, what did you say?”

Ainz chuckled, because Osk and Ainzach were looking at him in an amusing way. However, it would be bad if that laugh was interpreted as sneering, so Ainz tried to mask it with a snort.

However, that was impossible for someone who had only a hole for a nose.

Ainz decided not to waste his energy and decided to try and bluff his way through with words.

“You seem to have misheard me. I said, it is fine.”

There was no change in Osk's expression, but his mind was working at high speeds. That much was obvious.

"...Then, will you swear it on the name of the Sorcerer King, Your Majesty?"

"Swear on my name? ...I understand. I, Ainz Ooal Gown, swear by my own name that I shall not use any form of magic during the battle with the Martial Lord."

"Wait! Your Majesty! How can you make such an oath without even seeing the Martial Lord's strength?"

Ainzach's words were very sensible. However, if his information on the Martial Lord was correct, there should be no problems in doing so.

"Well, it'll work out somehow."

"Do you really think it'll work itself out?!"

Ainz was vaguely moved by Ainzach's retort. Nobody had stated their opinions like this ever since he had begun his reign as the ruler of Nazarick. That had come up a little during his time as Momon, but even that had faded away after he had risen through the ranks.

"You too! If the king of another country dies in the Empire's arena, there'll be hell to pay!"

Of course, Ainz thought as he locked eyes with Osk.

"Well, that's only to be expected. What will you do, Your Majesty? It is not too late to accept the advice of your loyal subject and give up now."

Ainz shrugged in response. He could understand Ainzach's worries. After all, this plan had originally been his idea. Granted, he had been operating under the assumption that he could use magic when he came up with that plan. However, did he really think that Ainz without magic was that weak?

"It will be fine. More importantly, shouting like that is quite shameful, Ainzach. Then, Osk. I'm not too clear on this, but what good does my death do you?"

Osk's eyes went wide in surprise. A reaction like that was not the slightest bit cute on a middle-aged man like him.

"It seems Your Majesty is mistaken. I would gain nothing from it. As the Guildmaster says, it would be a far greater hindrance for me."

There did not seem to be any ulterior motives behind proposing these disadvantageous conditions for Ainz. In all likelihood, it had been born from his thoughts as a promoter.

"—Is that so. Then, we will proceed as planned.."

"...Your Majesty, do you have a way to defeat the Martial Lord — who is stronger than Gazef Stronoff — without magic?"

"...Stronoff, huh. Truly a man of enviable strength."

Ainz noticed the look of surprise on Ainzach's face, but Ainz did not say a word as he recalled the former Warrior-Captain.

"If the Martial Lord is stronger than that man, then obviously, I'll have to be on my guard. However, the strength I speak of refers to his spirit and not his fighting ability. Now, if we were comparing the strength of the Martial Lord's and Stronoff's sword arms, surely the former would slay the latter in a moment."

"I see. Speaking of which, I must continue answering the question which you asked earlier, Your Majesty."

Osk raised both his hands. His arms were muscular and bereft of flab.

"I love the clash of sword against sword and fist against fist. Regretfully, I have no talent for fighting skills, and all my efforts could win me victory. That was why I thought of making a warrior who could substitute for me, and have him attain victory in my place."

Osk sneered. This was not the merchant's attitude he had been showing until now, but his face as a human being.

This was the first time Ainz had encountered such a strange person, although he knew that fetishes varied from person to person. In other words, Osk had a particularly abnormal fetish. Ainz made a mental compartment called “Perverts” and filed Osk into it.

“Therefore, it would feel very good should Your Majesty lose to the Martial Lord I have trained.”

“Is that so.”

Osk and Ainzach looked at Ainz, surprise written all over their faces.

Ainz wanted to ask, *what have you been doing since just now?*

“Don’t give me that dumb look. If you have something to say, say it.”

“No, no, that’s all I have to say.”

“I have no idea what sort of reaction you want from me, Osk… Humans are truly complicated creatures. Well? If that’s all, does that mean you expect me to fill the gap? ...Hm, how about this. Are you really that happy to beat me while I cannot use my magic?”

For some reason, Osk stumbled over his answer.

“Eh, ah, that… It’s just that I don’t really like magic that much…”

“I see. Then, let’s leave the matter at that.”
Osk and Ainzach looked at each other. *Come on, spit it out,* Ainz thought. Still, this was how the working world went. If someone who has no permission to speak bared his heart, he would get into trouble.

“We have made our true intentions known to each other, so let us not waste time with petty deceptions and get on with things. How will you arrange the schedule for the fight with the Martial Lord? If possible, I’d like to make a big event of it.”

"Then, I'll officially announce a challenger to the Martial Lord after today's events. I'd better get on it. However, I intend to keep the fact that the challenger is Your Majesty a secret until the match starts."

"I do not understand your reasons for that. Would that not be a waste, from a promoter's point of view?"

"Logic dictates that the king of an allied country showing up at an arena match is… oya? Come to think of it, I haven't heard of a welcoming ceremony. Is it scheduled for later?"

Ainz could not help but look away.

This was bad.

Ainz gave thanks that he did not have a heart, and then forcefully shook his empty, undead skull. Then, he shrugged helplessly.

"I came to the Empire in a personal capacity. El-Nix-dono does not know that I am here."

Osk's expression vanished. He must have scented something suspicious. As a merchant, it made sense that he would be very sensitive to potential profit. In other words, if there were no gains to be made, there would be no point in participating.

"I understand."

Eh?

"Publicly announcing Your Majesty's challenge would surely draw comments from all sides. Naturally, the identity of the challenger must be kept secret. Then, can I assume you will handle all the issues which will result from this, Your Majesty?"

"Of course. Leave that part of things to me."

"I understand. Then, can I take up a bit more of your time? I would like to finalize the schedule for the day of the match."

◆ ◆ ◆

“Has he gone back?”

“Yes, Master.”

The butler had returned from sending off the Sorcerer King, and that was his answer to Osk’s question.

“Really now,” Osk replied, and then he looked to the maid standing behind the butler.

“—Headhunter Rabbit.”

What, the man before him thought as he tilted his dainty little head.

Yes, “his.” He was a man, dressed in an outfit that best fit a maid.

According to him, he did so because dressing like a woman made others underestimate him and become careless, and also because people would not attack his groin.

It would seem that it was for those two reasons, and not because of personal preference. However, given that he displayed adorable motions like those from just now even in everyday life, he probably enjoyed this sort of thing to some extent.

The fact that his thoughts had actually wandered that far was a sign that he was thinking too much about this.

It did not inconvenience Osk in any particular way, so he did not mind.

Then, there was the matter of his alias, “Headhunter Rabbit”.

It did not suit a cute-looking man, but then again, he was a mercenary who hailed from a nation to the east of the City-State Alliance, famous as a warrior-cum-assassin.

Osk had signed a contract with him and hired him for a staggering amount. He had contracted worker teams and gladiators as bodyguards too, but nobody else was paid as highly as him.

His strength matched his price tag — above an orichalcum-ranked adventurer, at the very least. The fact was that he had not been embroiled in any troublesome matters ever since he had employed him.

“Tell me what you think of His Majesty, the Sorcerer King.”

He had another ability, besides being a first-rate fighter-cum-assassin.

That was the ability to analyze his opponents. Through long experience in the murderous profession of being a warrior and assassin, he had attained the ability to evaluate people — to see if they were strong.

“It’s extremely bad.”

To date, there was only one other person about whom he had stated a similar opinion. That person was the Martial Lord himself. In other words, this was the second person he could not defeat.

Incidentally, the rank below that was “It’s bad”, which he had said when he had seen the Empire’s Four Knights.

“Is His Majesty a strong warrior as well?”

“I’m not sure. Judging by his footsteps alone, he’s not that strong. He doesn’t walk like someone who’s been trained as a warrior or assassin. Rather, the uncle beside him feels more like a warrior. Still — it’s bad. Just standing behind him made me want to run away.”

After he said that, he extended his arms.

Osk’s eyes were entranced by his fists.

They were round fists.

His fists had been reshaped by punching hard objects tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands of times, until they were now in a round, ball-like shape.

These hands were made for battle.

A chill ran through Osk, followed by an uncontrollable excitement.

"—Where are you looking, you pervert."

"I was just thinking that those were good hands."

It was true he liked those hands very much, but sadly, Headhunting Rabbit did not interest him.

Gender was not a big matter for him. However, Osk's ideal partner was the warrior from the Kingdom's Blue Rose (Gagaran). Granted, Headhunting Rabbit would make a good partner as well, but he felt too skinny, compared to her. In contrast, the Martial Lord was a little too thick.

"...So you don't want me to renew my contract with you next year?"

"That would be very troubling! Hardly anyone can match up to you… Well, the heiress of Ijaniya aside. Oops, it seems we've gotten off-topic. Then—"

Osk's eyes left those round fists, and travelled up. Goosebumps broke out on Headhunting Rabbit's skin.

"I haven't been able to calm down yet. It feels really bad."

"So he's nothing much as a warrior, but he's an extremely bad opponent…"

"He's just like another Martial Lord."

Osk picked up on what Headhunting Rabbit was trying to say. He was referring to that Martial Lord.

There were powerful and weak races in this world.

Humans typified the weak races, being little more than meatbags without darkvision, with no hard carapaces to protect their bodies, or other special abilities.

In contrast, there were the mighty races, like Dragons, for instance. They were protected by hard scales, they were graceful and mighty, they were equipped with claws and teeth which could easily rend steel, they possessed fiery or icy breath and other special abilities, and they were furnished with wings that they could use to soar through the sky.

They were a race that was strong, even without warrior training.

What Headhunting Rabbit was trying to say was that the Sorcerer King belonged to such a race.

The undead had poor physical stats. This was what Osk knew to be true. Yet, it did not seem to be the case for the Sorcerer King.

“Osk-sama, why did you accept this match? His Majesty knows about the Martial Lord, but we do not know about his abilities. I feel it will be a very unfavorable match.”

“...Ara? You don’t get it?”

Headhunting Rabbit replied in a tired voice, “I don’t think about these pointless things—”
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The butler looked to Osk in a surprised way. Thus, Osk answered:

“Does the champion flee from challengers?”

“Is that all?”

“That is all. However, that is also why it is so important. There’s no need to just kill each other. But if this is an official challenge, complete with a letter sent up to request a match, it can’t be avoided. The Martial Lord would think the same way as well.”

“What an idiot—”

“Perhaps. Still, that’s men for you. However, I feel His Majesty is the type who reveals his true strength in battle, rather than during a competitive match. Now, consider a regulated bout, and a no-holds-barred deathmatch. Under which circumstances would you prefer to face the Sorcerer King?”

“Neither. I’d turn tail and run.”

Osk laughed, because that was the wisest choice.

“Then, next up. What do you think of the Sorcerer King?”

That line was not directed at his master, but at the butler waiting in the rear who did not change his expression.

In the past, he might have expressed his displeasure silently, to indicate that was not the proper attitude a hired man should have toward his master. Still, that displeasure had vanished somewhere along the way. Perhaps it was when Headhunting Rabbit had slain a would-be assassin.

“He has a very charming personality.”

“Ho~n,” Headhunting Rabbit mused in a strange way.

Ainzach did not appear to be under duress. In other words, the Sorcerer King had something which allowed him to secure the cooperation of a city’s residents within a few months of conquering it.

“Did you see his regal bearing? Whether it was in bringing only Ainzach, or agreeing to not use magic in his battle, he radiated the pride of the mighty. In addition, he’s a very intelligent man. It feels like he’s very used to this sort of negotiations.”

Even he felt it was surprising.

Osk was a merchant, but the Sorcerer King viewed him as an equal. Under normal circumstances, some nobles would want to establish who was on top, to say nothing of a king.

This was what baffled him.

He could understand it if he had been a trader in the past, but that was impossible. In other words, he was simply adept at negotiations.

“In terms of overall ability, he is comparable to our Emperors.”

Of course, he had not read that deeply into him. It was simply that the Sorcerer King frightened him that much.

“No, I should say that he’s equivalent to the Bloody Emperor, at the very least.”

So at a minimum, he was equal to the greatest Emperor in history. What a nightmare.

Osk shook his head. He would be paralyzed by contemplation if this went on. Of course, he did not want to gaze into the abyss of the Sorcerer King. However, there was one thing he had to do right now.

“...I must inform the Martial Lord of this, and keep him in prime condition from now on.”

“Will he agree?”

“He is a warrior. He will not run from a challenge.”

“Ho~n. Well, it’d be good if he could win~”

Part 4

On the day of the match with the Sorcerer King, Osk asked the usual question:

“How are things?

“No problems. I’m in top form.”

A gigantic monster answered him.

It was a member of the Troll species of monsters, but one major difference set it apart from them.

That would be the air of a warrior that surrounded it, a mantle which none but those who had survived countless intense battles would be able to assume.

However, that was only to be expected. He was a troll who had adapted to fighting and who had specialized in battle. He was an outstanding individual even amongst the diverse troll species, and he was known as a War Troll.

He was the Martial Lord, the strongest gladiator in the arena.

Osk looked tenderly at that body.

It was true that there were many people who could beat the Martial Lord in terms of martial prowess (strength). Most silver-ranked frontliners in adventurer teams could do that. However, the reason why the Martial Lord could easily defeat such people was very simple.

This was because the bodies of War Trolls were far superior to those of humans, be it in terms of strength or endurance, or in the huge attack radius their massive frames granted them.

In addition, there were the racial abilities he possessed which humans did not.

The first of them was his skin. Wearing a suit of armor over that thick hide of his was sufficient to cause the majority of attacks directed at him to simply bounce off. Granted, one could target the soft-looking and mobile joints but his regeneration presented a formidable barrier to anyone attempting to cripple him via that route.

An attack that would certainly slay a normal human being would not kill a troll. Their astounding regenerative ability caused wounds to seal shut and it could only be stopped by fire or acid.

With this immense biological power on his side, the current Martial Lord was truly the strongest in history.

The warrior that Osk praised as the mightiest donned his armor before the man's eyes.

He had hired adamantite-ranked adventurers to gather the components for that armor, and then had the masterwork result enhanced with magic. At that time, he had sunk about 20% of his assets into that particular project. The club he carried was made of a magical alloy as well, and it had been made in a similar manner.

The Martial Lord put on his magic rings, amulets, and the other components of his panoply.

"—I'm ready."

Those words sounded far more intelligent now than how he had spoken in the past.

Every time Osk saw his majestic frame, his chest grew hot. He was the one who had raised him into this state.

"Then, Martial Lord, let's go."

They walked together to the entrance of the arena. This was a ritual they had always performed.

The Martial Lord remained silent after leaving his room.

His silence was because he had once been excited and looked forward to fighting his foes. Somewhere along the way, it had turned to disappointment in his opponents' abilities. How would it be now?

Suddenly, the Martial Lord stopped in his tracks.

Osk did not recall anything happening like this before.

He began to panic at this unprecedented occurrence, and looked up to ask what was going on. The Martial Lord slowly raised the visor of his armet helm, revealing his face.

“Thank you…”

It sounded as though he was squeezing out that voice.

Osk blinked.

This was only the fourth time he had heard those words of thanks. The previous three times had been when he was given his weapon, his armor, and then when he had fought his best opponent, the previous Martial Lord “Rot Wolf”, Krelvo Palantynen.

“What, what's wrong, Martial Lord?”

His eyes stared at the corridor before him.

“Fu, fu.”

The Martial Lord's body quivered as he chuckled.

It was the excitement of a warrior.

That was what Osk believed, but it did not seem to be the case.

“What kind of… What kind of challenger is this? No, am I the challenger?”

“Wha-what?”

“Fu, fu… How scary. Osk, I’m shaking in fear.”

Osk could not help but doubt his ears.

“This, this must be what living beings call instinct. My legs won’t move… It’s as though they’re telling me that if I go, I’ll die, fu, fu.”

That was not laughter. He was simply trying to calm his disturbed breathing.

“I heard my opponent was the Sorcerer King, and I wondered what sort of foe he would be… It would seem my arrogance up till now will be repaid in full.”

“What are you saying, Martial Lord? What do you mean, arrogance?”

“I am strong.”

Osk wanted to reply that there was nothing wrong with the Martial Lord’s statement, but the Martial Lord continued before he could say so.

“No, my strength is a lie. It comes from my racial abilities, and it is not actual strength. Still, there are very few people who can contend with me. In particular, ever since I learned to use warrior techniques, I have never tried to understand my challengers’ abilities or equipment, in order to create an unfavorable situation for me. There is no other way to train myself. But in the end, I have found a foe which my instincts are screaming at me to run away from. Thank you very much. You have completely fulfilled the agreement we made when you met me.”

“Martial Lord… Go Gin.”

He had met the Martial Lord about ten years ago.

There had been a rumor on the streets about a monster on the outskirts of the Empire. That monster was very rational, and would not slay a foe who put down their weapons. Osk was interested, and hurriedly set forth from the Empire to meet that bizarre monster. This was because he heard that the greatest power in the Empire, Fluder Paradyne, was on his way to dispatch the monster.

He had been afraid at first. That was only natural. After all, the humans who had encountered him had only survived by chance.

However, the Martial Lord had taken one look at Osk and snorted in disinterest, preparing to leave.

That was why he forgot his fear and asked: "Why are you doing this?"

The answer he got was not quite as articulate as it was now, but it had been along the lines of "I am training to become stronger."

Osk felt the scales fall from his eyes.

Osk had a dream. That dream was to make a strong fighter. It was a dream of raising the ultimate warrior, in order to substitute for his talentless self. However, at that point, he realised that he did not need to limit himself to human beings. No, since nonhuman species were higher-spec to begin with, would that not be the way to make a strong — the ultimate warrior?

At that point, Osk was not thinking about bringing a monster back. He was scouting someone who might well be the ultimate warrior, the tyrant of the arena, the future Martial Lord.

It had been almost ten years since that fateful encounter. And now, for the first time, he witnessed the Martial Lord shaking in fear.

"Martial Lord—"

Several things popped up in Osk's mind. The first was, "Do you want to forfeit this match?" The risk of death existed within this bout, and Osk could not bear to lose him, the Martial Lord that he had raised until now.

However, he could not bring himself to speak those words.

To the strong, having someone show concern for them was like an insult. For all he knew, those words might shatter the friendship he had built between himself and the Martial Lord.

There was only one thing he could say here.

"—Don't lose, Martial Lord."

"Hmph. What are you saying? I have no intention of losing. All my challengers felt the same way. Everyone stood before me in the hopes of achieving victory. Now, it is simply my turn."

"That's the way!"

Osk slapped the Martial Lord on the back.

"The Sorcerer King is a magic caster, but that would be too boring of a contest. So, I have ruled that both sides cannot use magic. You will not lose to a foe like that."

"...His magic? The Sorcerer King agreed to fight me, even under those conditions?"

"Indeed, and he did so with an attitude which did not even consider the possibility of his defeat."

"Hoh…"

The Martial Lord clenched his fist. It was a fist that called to mind the image of a giant maul.

"The strong are often proud. I shall teach him the foolishness of his ways."

"That's the spirit! However, do not get cocky. The Sorcerer King is the sort of man who can give away jaw-dropping weapons on a whim. In all likelihood, he possesses magic items of awesome power."

Restricting the use of magic items would probably increase the Martial Lord's chances of victory. But that would be too much of a handicap.

"It'll be fine. I now possess the mindset of a challenger. I will not be overconfident. I will not lose because I did not use my full strength."

The Martial Lord took a step forward with a muscular leg, and Osk scrambled to follow.

“Say, could you seriously consider what we talked about earlier?”

The Martial Lord suddenly stopped in his tracks, a look of disgust on his face.

“Earlier… you mean that?”

“Yes, the matter of your wife.”

“Why now… Huhaha.”

The Martial Lord laughed, and Osk furrowed his brows while he blushed. *If you understand, don’t act like that!*

“Really, can you not cheer me on some other way? How many times must I say this… I will return to my village if I want a wife. You want my partner to be a human, right? Thank you very much, but I’ll pass on any humans or whatnot. I’m not into perverted things like that, or rather, any human who would actually want to sleep with me would be absolutely disgusting. What kind of sick fetish would that be, anyway? Besides, you want my child, right? I can’t make those with humans.”

While it should be possible for humanoids to breed with each other, having children with demihumans was the sort of thing that only existed in stories.

“Well, that’s true… That being the case, why not bring your wife back with you? If you need anything to return in triumph, let me know and I’ll get it for you.”

“...Let me get this out of the way first. We Trolls think of humans as food. My wife might end up calmly eating humans, for all I know.”

To Osk, it would be fine if she only ate unnecessary humans. However, he did not say that.

“Is that so. Then bring your child back before he knows the taste of manflesh. If we train him up more intensively, he’ll surely be stronger than you are now.”

The Martial Lord crinkled his face with a smile.

“Well, that would be interesting. Alright, I will consider that seriously.”

◆ ◆ ◆

“Your Majesty, can you really win this?”

Ainz replied to Ainzach’s question with the answer he had given countless times:

“It’ll be fine.”

A person who would take on a hopeless battle was either a true man of courage or an utter fool. This was not a random encounter; the battle had been decided from the planning phases.

Ainz reviewed what he had learned in his mind.

If the Martial Lord was only on the level of the Giant of the East, he would surely be able to win. That said, if he had the same strength as a warrior as Gazef, then after adding up his racial and job class levels, he would be a very tricky foe.

However—

Well, it was a pretty despicable fighting method to begin with. I even asked Fluder for help after that.

Ainz had the ability to completely negate weak attacks. He did not think the Martial Lord would be able to breach that defense. Therefore, Ainz had disabled that particular ability.

Victory was not assured for him.

At that battlefield, Ainz had killed over 100,000 people with magic. In YGGDRASIL, the amount of experience points gained was reduced in accordance to the level difference between both parties, to a minimum of one point. In other words, he should have earned over 100,000 experience points. Coupled with the accumulated experience from before coming to this new world, he should have gotten enough to level up. However, Ainz did not feel that he had levelled up or seen any related phenomena.

In other words, Ainz could not get any stronger, as he had expected.

Still — he could not be content with that.

If level 100 was the limit, then it could not be helped. However, he was then obliged to fully utilize the power of those 100 levels and refine his skills. If he believed he was the strongest and rested on his laurels, someone might someday surpass him.

Ainz knew that he had a certain amount of strength from being a mage. The skills and abilities he had honed in YGGDRASIL were also effective here. However, he had not practiced his abilities as a vanguard in YGGDRASIL.

I learned a lot from the battle with that woman.

He felt nothing but gratitude for that woman, who had taught him how lacking he was as a frontline fighter.

That battle had sparked the desire in Ainz to improve his close combat ability. Right now, Ainz was confident that in stats, skills and even tactics, he was the equivalent of a level 33 warrior.

This battle with the Martial Lord would be the proof of that. Ainz eagerly looked forward to it.

Ainz looked at his neck.

He did not have the luxury of wearing that any more. During the encounter with the Workers, he did not feel that he had earned much experience or learned any techniques. Honestly speaking, it felt like a waste of effort.

As he thought about that, Ainz recalled a more pressing problem.

Ah~ Jircniv is watching this fight too, right? Why is he here? He wasn't around when I came to check just now. It looks like the illegal border crossing is going to be exposed… Well, I guess I can just apologise for it. If he makes a big deal of it, I'll just ask him if he got the Kingdom's permission when he came to Nazarick and be done with it… I should probably go up and say hello to him. I guess not greeting him will ruin my image in his eyes.

“Your, Your Majesty, it’s about time to enter,” the man from the arena said as he entered the room to notify Ainz.

They had met several times, but he froze up every time he saw Ainz’s true face.

Should I fight while masked? He considered that, but he had gained permission to make a speech after beating the Martial Lord. For all he knew, there might be people in the audience who wanted to become adventurers in the Sorcerous Kingdom. With that in mind, it would be better not to engage in any deceptions.

All he could do was to trust his own choices.

Ainz slowly stepped forward.

Normally speaking, the higher-ranked person ought to enter later. However, Ainz was the challenger in this arena, and was thus the lower-ranking one. Thus, he was obliged to enter first. Of course, Ainz saw it as natural and did not question it.

Ainz smiled to the very worried-looking Ainzach.

It seemed strange that he was more worried than the one who was about to go into battle himself.

“—Don’t make me repeat myself, Ainzach. I will not lose.”

◆ ◆ ◆

After greeting Jircniv, Ainz returned to the arena.

He had promised not to use magic during the fight, but the fight had not started yet. Surely his opponent would not quibble over something like that.

He didn't seem too angry despite the fact that I crossed the border illegally. Is he going to complain afterwards? Or did he think I entered normally? If that was the case, they might end up hosting some sort of welcome for me, or maybe I'm being too self-conscious… Will he be mad because I directly addressed him as Jircniv?

Ainz mocked his thoughts, and then turned his eyes toward the entrance which faced him.

The Martial Lord had not showed up yet.

Then...

Ainz looked around at the audience in the arena.

A shocked silence ruled the scene. Even the slightest movement was clearly audible.

Well, it can't be helped… No, you people over there, this is not a mask.

Ainz felt his smooth and shiny face. Now he understood. Anyone who could look at this face nonchalantly must be quite brave.

Because of this, my popularity will increase once I get the audience fired up.

While his objective was not to boost his popularity, it was better to have it than not. Plus, if it ended up raising the general opinion of all undead, it would probably improve their opinion of the Sorcerous Kingdom, which controlled many undead.

Ainz gripped the staff in his hand.

As a pure magic caster, Ainz's selection in weapons was very limited, largely to staves, daggers and the like. This time round, he had selected a staff used for physical attacks. It was a weapon he had made as a prototype in YGGDRASIL, but which had ended up unused. Since it was something he had used a long time ago, it was not very strong. Ainz as he was now could probably make a better weapon.

That said, Ainz had not made such preparations.

After considering the difference in strength between himself and the Martial Lord, Ainz had decided to fight him with his present weapon, to see how it — and the fight — turned out.

This was the ultimate in foolishness to the YGGDRASIL player Suzuki Satoru, an unforgivable lapse of carelessness. If his friends were nearby, they might rebuke him with a "That won't do~"

However, he had already learned about all of the Martial Lord's magic items from Fluder. Thus, he had to subject himself to these unfavorable circumstances in order to use this as training.

He did not want to show them a one-sided slaughter. Ainz's objective was an overwhelming victory of just the right amount.

"Ladies and gentlemen! From the north entrance! The! Martial! Lord!"

Unlike how they had treated him earlier, the entire arena erupted in cheering. Ainz could hear Jircniv's voice from the VIP room where he had shown his face earlier. The man was screaming as though to break his throat.

...He sounds pretty excited. Does Jircniv really like the Martial Lord that much? The king of the ring seems to be an idol of sorts, so this should be a normal reaction, right? It was the same in YGGDRASIL — the strong fighters in PVP matches were very popular with the spectators.

As he reminisced about his YGGDRASIL days, Ainz began to pity Jircniv a little.

He'll be shocked when I win. Like a client whose sports team lost...

It weighed on his heart, but he could not throw the match.

A massive shadow appeared from the opposite entrance.

The cheering he thought could not get any louder went up another level, and now it sounded like an explosion.

In all honesty, he wanted a part of that cheering for himself, but he would simply have to claim it with his own strength.

In YGGDRASIL, the voices of the supporters would slowly turn toward the challenger if they did well. In other words if Ainz fought well against the Martial Lord, more and more people would start to support Ainz.

So it seems conditions like these where I hardly have any support are pretty good for advertising myself, no?

He could slowly see the form of the Martial Lord.

He wore a suit of full plate armor, and carried a gigantic club.

As he beheld this walking fortress before him, Ainz's eyes — the flickering red flames within the empty orbits of his skull — narrowed into points.

Hm… He looks about the same as the description. That being the case — no, that would be reckless. I'd better be careful.

According to the information Fluder had supplied, he did not possess any particularly lethal equipment.

However, in YGGDRASIL, some people would prepare a set of identical-looking gear, equipped with completely different data crystals. In PVP matches, small tricks like that improved the chances of victory. Although backup gear was typically weaker than one's main panoply, being able to surprise a foe had effects beyond mere data values.

He could not guarantee that the Martial Lord would not do that.

Ainz took that into consideration as he continued to study the Martial Lord.

He had heard of him before, but seeing the real thing made him think, "No wonder". That was probably what they meant by the saying "seeing is believing". From what Fluder had told him, the creature under that armor looked very similar to the War Troll he had turned into a zombie, but the Martial Lord had a completely different air around him.

One could say it was the difference between a domesticated pig and a wild boar.

"This is… interesting… Interesting?"

Ainz furrowed his eyebrows at his own excitement. He felt the same way as he did then; that this was going to be a good fight. Perhaps he was becoming a battle maniac, given the way he relished combat.

That was not a good sign.

The distance between them shrank. His opponent was the first to speak.

"I am the War Troll Go Gin, known as the Martial Lord."

“I am —” here Ainz puffed out his chest. “The Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown, an undead being of the highest order, an Overlord.”

“Is that so. Then let us fight with all our strength.”

“...Oya?”

Ainz was quite surprised.

There were two things about which he was curious, and he decided to start with the bigger one.

“Aren’t you going to make fun of my name?”

“Why?”

“You’re asking why…?”

Ainz tilted his head at the counter-inquiry. That was how it had gone back then.

“I seem to recall long names are something to you…?”

“I see. It would seem you do understand my species well, Your Majesty. Indeed, my species considers those with short names to be strong. However, I have lived in this country for many years. During that time, I have learned that humans take long names. Thus, I will not make fun of such things. In addition, I sense that you are quite proud of that name, Your Majesty. Insulting the names of the strong is shameful for a warrior.”

“Is that so… It would seem I need to revise my opinion of War Trolls now.”

“Fuhahahaha. No need for that. I am merely an outlier. In addition, different species have members with different opinions. That is all.”

“...Hahahaha! Indeed. I like you, Martial Lord… If I win, how about I keep you?”

Ainz extended his right hand.

Although it had been rejected back then, the present circumstances were different. The Martial Lord considered the matter, and replied:

“...Alright. If I lose, I will become your subordinate. And if I win?”

“Well, that is a troubling question. What do you want? Name your desire.”

“...Then I will have you, Your Majesty.”

“...Hah?”

“To date, I have not encountered anyone worth killing for a meal. But if I can eat you, who are stronger than me, I will obtain your powers, Your Majesty.”

Ainz calmed down a little. He had heard a lecture from a guildmate about the culture of cannibals. Although they ate people, the motive behind that was the same as the Martial Lord, to obtain the power of the enemy’s soul. There were also other reasons for that, like fetishes and so on.

At least it’s not sexual. I wouldn’t lose from that, but it would feel really gross if someone was looking at me in that way during a fight.

“Alright. After all, the right of life and death rests in the hands of the victor. So even if I kill you, you must not reject the resurrection.”

Ainz stepped forward. The Martial King took a stance in an instant, but he immediately relaxed.

Ainz advanced with his right hand extended. The Martial Lord returned the gesture, extending his own massive right hand.

This was less a handshake than the Martial Lord's hand swallowing up his own. A great cheer rose from the audience.

“Then, I have another question. Why do you address me respectfully?”

The Martial Lord’s attitude was not like a reigning champion greeting a challenger.

“It is only sensible to address the strong with respect.”

“I see… Alright, I understand. That’s all the questions I have. Let’s start. How far apart should we be? Like the distance just now — about ten meters or so? I will strive to abide by the rules of this arena.”

“There are no rules for distance, but it doesn’t matter. You’ll soon be within my striking range.”

“This is a handicap, a handicap.”

The Martial Lord did not speak, but nodded to show he understood.

His face could not be seen, but his breathing and actions were calm.

Had he seen through the taunt, or was that not enough to upset him?

Ainz mentally clicked his tongue.

What a troublesome foe. If his emotions were vulnerable, he could play on that, but one could not look down on a vigilant foe, even if they were lower in level.

The Martial Lord turned his back to Ainz, and walked away.

He turned back again after travelling about ten meters.

“Then, we’ll start when the bell goes, Your Majesty.”

“Right… say, Martial Lord, I’ve fought your kind before, but have you fought my kind before?”

“Overlords? No, I have not. I’ve never heard of that undead… species.”

“Is that so… Well, that’s true. If you met anyone of my kind, you wouldn’t be alive to stand here. Overlords are the highest-ranking undead… Then, have you fought any undead before?”

"No, I've never fought the undead. After all, the undead they bring here are obviously no match for me."

"Really now… Then I can't say 'don't think I'm like the other undead you've fought. I'm several times more powerful than an Elder Lich'... What a shame."

The Martial Lord chuckled.

Ainz shrugged, and raised his staff like a greatsword. Ainzach should be watching from behind, but he had not shown him his fighting stance as Momon, so it should be fine.

The Martial Lord raised his gigantic club as well.

The bell went off.

In that instant, Ainz was swallowed up by an enormous black shadow.

Cheh, he's fast!

That was the shadow of a club swinging down.

Block the strike with the staff — Ainz wanted to do that, but immediately abandoned the notion. While he did not know enough about the enemy, the best thing to do in the face of a big move — one which was highly damaging — was to dodge.

Thus, not caring if he lost his balance, Ainz threw himself into evasion.

Ainz managed to dodge by the skin of his teeth. The club slammed into the ground, releasing a thunderous impact that even produced an echo. The smoke and dust it produced gusted up like an explosion.

Worried about any follow-up strikes, Ainz fell back several paces.

After the dust cleared, the shadow of the Martial Lord, club in hand, appeared from within it.

A great cry rose up from the arena.

Was it a martial art? Still… this is pretty exciting.

He could clearly hear Jircniv's shouting his support amidst the ear-splitting cheers. "Get him! He's right there!" and other such childish cries.

Ainz could not help but chuckle as he heard these cries from Jircniv, which were completely unlike him. He could not have imagined him acting like that from all the times he had spied on him in the Imperial City.

...He's an unexpectedly interesting chap...

Ainz's opinion of Jircniv rose rapidly. At first, he had believed that he was a perfect man with the air of an Emperor. However, now that he saw how passionate he was about the match, he felt that he could get along even better with him. Ainz's heart filled with a sense of closeness.

Then, Ainz returned his attention to the Martial Lord.

The Martial Lord was pointing that giant club of his toward him, implying that he would be intercepted if he came close and pursued if he backed off. It was a stance well-suited to pinning down one's opponents.

It was a defensive stance that made full use of his weapon's length, practically turning it into a shield.

In all honesty, Ainz had no clue how to break that stance of his.

This… might be troublesome. It would seem being unable to use magic against an evenly-matched opponent is quite difficult. Well, I am a magic caster, after all...

That being the case , there was only one thing he could do.

"Well? Aren't you coming? Or will you cower there like a turtle?"

"Your Majesty, I will not let my guard down. Even though the rules keep you from using magic, the fact that you could dodge that strike cannot be taken lightly."

"So, you want me to take the offensive? In that case, would you mind moving that club of yours aside? It's kind of in the way and makes it hard to attack."

The Martial Lord did not answer. His keen gaze remained affixed on Ainz through the slits of his helmet's visor.

"Well then… In that case, allow me."

Ainz savagely swung his staff at the tip of the club. The club forcefully struck the ground, as the Martial Lord grunted "Ggh!"

The impact should have been transmitted into the Martial Lord's hands and numbed them. In contrast, Ainz had no such biological functions.

In an instant, Ainz charged into the Martial Lord's attack range.

Ainz sent a mental command to his staff, and flames billowed from it. That said, "billowing flames" simply meant a layer of fire that surrounded the staff. The flames did not constitute an attack in themselves. However, Ainz sensed the Martial Lord's attention shifting from himself to the staff.

That's right. You Trolls have regenerative powers. Thus, it's perfectly rational to be mindful of weapons that negate your regeneration, such as those which can inflict fire or acid damage. However, that is a fatal mistake.

Ainz touched the Martial Lord's armor with his empty left hand. In that moment, the Martial Lord shuddered like he had been electrocuted, making him swing his club without thinking.

"Kuh!"

Ainz failed to dodge, and the sounds of cracking came from his body as he was smashed into the distance. Since he had disabled his High-Tier Physical Immunity and he was weak to bludgeoning attacks, that strike dealt a lot of damage. Ainz's body flew several meters, no, over 10 meters through the air, like a ball struck by a bat.

Then, he hit the ground, tumbling head over heels several times.

Thunderous cheering erupted from the crowd.

Ainz heard Jircniv shouting in delight as he rolled across the ground, and the surge in goodwill he had toward the man dropped swiftly.

Dammit, we're allied countries, aren't we? Shouldn't you be a bit more concerned about the fact that an allied king is down on the ground, huh?

Though he had taken damage, Ainz no longer felt pain, and he peered at the Martial Lord from where he was on the ground.

There was no follow-up attack.

The sounds of cheering gradually died down, replaced by a sense of disquiet that covered the entire arena. Why had the Martial Lord not pressed the attack? No, why was the Martial Lord bending over? What was slowing down the Martial Lord's movements.

Ainz gracefully rose to his feet, dusting himself off. He did not seem at all bothered at being sent flying.

In contrast, the Martial Lord's movements were extremely sluggish.

Ainz chuckled.

This was the best way the show could have gone.

Ainz returned to his original position, amidst a cacophony of noise. The Martial Lord asked in doubt:

"Wh-what is this? Poison… no, what is this?"

"I did not break the rules. This is a proper contest. That said, this is far beyond the word 'poison'. My touch can infuse negative energy into an opponent's body. However, a Troll's regeneration should be able to heal that."

Ainz made the same gesture he used when touching the Martial Lord, opening and closing his fingers.

“However, I have another ability in addition to that. I can inflict physical ability damage by touch. Thus, your strength and dexterity have been reduced. I don’t think you can heal *that*, can you?”

From what Ainz knew, Trollish regeneration could only heal damage, but not the weakening of the body.

“In other words, Martial Lord, the more I touch you, the lower your stats will become, until you end up like a caterpillar.”

Naturally, that was a lie.

He could inflict ability penalties on a foe, that much was true, but even that had a limit. He could not reduce stats to zero. Of course, his opponent could not possibly know that.

However, there were other undead with similar abilities, so he could not conclude that his opponent really did not know. He might have been bluffing about not fighting the undead, and he might know something related to them.

That was why Ainz had openly stated the name of his species.

Overlords are a very powerful species, and one which you know nothing about. Once he left that impression in the Martial Lord’s mind, he would feel that Ainz’s power was mysterious and unfathomable. Ainz had mentioned that he was of the highest order and whatnot to further reinforce that sense of unease.

The most important thing was that he had given an unnecessary explanation to the Martial Lord. That too was to confuse him with false information.

—Broadly speaking, all warfare is based on deception.

Ainz calmly studied the Martial Lord, who did not seem to be recovering from his ability penalties.

This was to see if the Martial Lord was trying to bluff with his actions.

He might have the ability to recover from his ability penalties but chose not to use it, in order to create a fatal flaw in Ainz's defense. He might also have a talent, or some other hidden ability which Ainz knew nothing about.

One could only trample one's foe in an open fight when there was an overwhelming difference in strength.

"...The ability penalties I inflict will not heal with time, you know. I will shave away at your physical stats bit by bit, until I deliver the final blow with this staff, understood? Well, if you do, then let's continue."

Ainz stepped forward, and the Martial Lord slowly took a stance.

He could not see the Martial Lord's face because of his helmet. Was he laughing to himself, or was he growing anxious?

The latter, I hope...

Ainz moved his left hand, the one which was not holding his staff. The Martial Lord shifted in response. It would seem he was very wary of it.

The Martial Lord must be thinking that all he needed to do was worry about the left hand.

That was it. During Ainz's experiments, he found that he could initiate touch attacks with any part of his body. If he felt like it, he could even use a headbutt to do so.

As Ainz got closer, the Martial Lord backed away from him.

Ainz laughed coldly.

From their movements, it was readily apparent to the audience who had the advantage here.

Do you know what the difference between us is, Martial Lord? Indeed, you might be better than me as a warrior. But there is something which decisively sets us apart.

The biggest difference between himself and the Martial Lord was that of their HP.

Ainz had the health of a level 100 character. Even if both parties abandoned defense and engaged in a slugging match, Ainz would emerge victorious.

However, the problem lay in martial arts, those attacks which Ainz did not know about.

“I laid down another restriction on myself besides not using magic. That would concern magic items. I did not use magic items during this bout with you — in other words, I gave myself an equipment restriction. Still, this is thoroughly beneficial to me.”

Ainz possessed numerous magic items from his time in YGGDRASIL. Each and every one of them was a peerless treasure in this world. Thus, if Ainz had used those, he could have easily won his battle with the Martial Lord. However, Ainz did not feel that was the proper way to fight.

Therefore, Ainz was equipped with low-tier items.

“I have restricted myself to using weapons which someone of your level can wield. On the other hand, I feel this is an excellent opportunity to test out a new acquisition.”

Ainz plunged his staff into the ground and withdrew two of the four stilettos sheathed at his waist. He gripped them tightly.

“Let’s test these weapons I borrowed from Momon.”

The Martial Lord probably did not understand Ainz’s blathering. Ainz had no intention of enlightening him. He was simply talking to himself.

“Then — here I come.”

Ainz could not imitate that bizarre stance — that strange crouching start. However, after practice, he had learned to run in a similar way. He shot out like a loosed arrow, toward the Martial Lord.

The distance was very short. Still, even in the brief opening before his opponent's attack, the Martial Lord's club swept across at him. The blow was slowed because his strength had been sapped by ability penalties, but it was a strike that should have connected.

Ainz could not execute a magnificent dodge like that woman. However, Ainz could do something which that woman could not.

He activated his ability, and the Martial Lord's movements halted for a moment.

Ainz closed the gap between them and thrust his stiletto, aiming for the shoulder. That full-power strike, boosted by his running speed, shot out like an arrow.

When she had hit him back then, she managed to damage Ainz's magically-created armor, which was harder than adamantite. This strike was on the same level as that, and the stiletto pierced the Martial Lord's armor and hide, penetrating the Martial Lord's body.

—However, in that moment—

“[Reinforce Hide], [Greater Reinforce Hide]!”

The Martial Lord activated his martial arts.

It was as though he had released something from within his body which pushed back against the tip of the stiletto

The startling thing was that Ainz’s full-strength hit only inflicted a tiny amount — a scratch’s worth — of damage. With Trollish regeneration, that sort of damage would heal within seconds.

The Martial Lord must have felt reassured by this. The club swinging toward Ainz was still very fast, and he had only taken a scratch from Ainz’s all-out attack. One could say that victory was at hand for the Martial Lord.

However, that would be a very foolish thing to say.

“—Activate.”

“Goh! Gowaaaaaaaaah!!”

He released the spell, channelling the [Fireball] which Fluder had cast into the weapon into the place where he had stabbed the Martial Lord, thus burning his body from within. He thought of plunging his other stiletto into the opposite shoulder, but he was not strong enough, and the armor deflected it.

As Ainz thought of targeting a chink in his armor, Ainz sensed movement from the Martial Lord and dashed to the side without looking.

A gale blew from behind him. It must have been the wind pressure from that club.

After fleeing for about 10 meters, Ainz turned back.

The Martial Lord was grabbing at his shoulder with the arm holding his club. His other arm dangled beneath him, probably immobile. It would seem

Fluder's spell was a little too strong. Perhaps he should have asked for a weaker magic caster to infuse it with magic.

After realising the Martial Lord was in dire straits, the crowd wailed in sympathy.

Ainz looked around the arena.

No matter where he looked, he could not see anyone cheering for him.

How strange… In YGGDRASIL, it wouldn't be unusual for someone to start cheering for me at this point… I guess away matches are hard.

"It can't be helped. I guess I'll have to abandon the plan of seizing the audience's heart. Now then, Martial Lord… time to die."

Ainz sheathed the stiletto whose magic was expended and drew another one. This new stiletto was imbued with a 3rd-tier acid-element attack spell. He had prepared this in case the Martial Lord had rendered himself immune to fire damage.

Granted, the Martial Lord looked like he had been hurt by that fire-elemental spell, but that might have been an act. Regenerating monsters could not completely resist attacks which shut down their regeneration, but that was only for YGGDRASIL.

For all he knew, it might be possible in this world.

If that was the case, his plan was to kill him by activating his skill when the audience — when everyone — could see that victory had been decided.

"If you admit defeat now… I'll end things here."

"No… Your Majesty. Not… not yet. I am still the Martial Lord. I am still the king of this arena. I will struggle until I die."

"Then, take off your helmet and let me see your face."

It was a surprising request, but the Martial Lord complied, and showed his face.

Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his face was twisted by what was probably intense pain. Yet, there was great strength in those eyes.

“Those are good eyes. They remind me of Gazef Stronoff.”

“Thank you. Being praised by a mighty being like yourself fills me with joy.”

“...Tell me. Do you have any moves which can beat me? Do you have any moves which can turn the tide?”

“—I do not. Even so, I still wish to fight.”

They were very honest words.

Ainz felt ashamed of using so many bluffs in this fight. In addition, there were all the abilities he had sealed off to make this a good match.

Since his opponent was fighting in earnest, Ainz was obliged to respond with everything he could do, within the range of what he was allowed to do.

The Martial Lord, who had come straight at Ainz, seemed to shine in his eyes.

“What would the Guardians think of the light in those eyes…”

Still, he knew that they would scorn any being that was not of Nazarick. If that was the case — unease and loneliness filled Ainz.

Ainz cast aside these emotions, and slowly raised his stilettos.

The Martial Lord wiped off his sweat with his forearm, and put his helmet back on.

“—Come at me, Martial Lord.”

“Gooohhhhhhh!”

With a roar, his vast body pressed in on Ainz.

He was faster than just now. Perhaps he had activated a martial art.

That incredible speed and that immense body — the two of them synergized to produce an overwhelming sense of oppression that would freeze any foe in place. No, that would apply to normal people, but the undead were immune to such mental effects.

Ainz calmly studied the Martial Lord.

He was fast — but that was all.

His balance was off, probably because the shoulder pierced by the stiletto was unable to move.

—Worse than that time.

More importantly—

Do you know the truth behind how I slowed you down? If you don't know, it'll be over for you, no?

Ainz activated the same ability from just now.

[Despair Aura I (Fear)]

This ability had five effects.

I was for Fear.
II was for Panic.
III was for Confusion.
IV was for Insanity.
V was for Instant Death.

Fear referred to an abnormal status of being afraid, which inflicted a penalty to all actions.

Panic was a more severe version of Fear, caused by stacking additional Fear effects on each other. Anyone afflicted by that status would want to flee the ability user at all costs — in other words, they would be unable to take any combat-related actions against that person.

Confusion was as the name suggested. Without any recovery measures, the target would be in a state of confusion.

Insanity was an extremely annoying bad status, being a permanent version of Confusion. It could not be removed without magic from a third party.

And it went without saying that Instant Death caused death.

The effects changed as one's level increased.

Ainz had used the Fear effect first, and then cancelled it almost instantly afterward. By doing so, there would be a moment where the actions one imagined did not match up to the actual actions taken, and thus the body would feel as if it had been paralyzed.

However, the Martial Lord had anticipated that this would happen if he tried a frontal attack. Even after his mind and body went out of sync, he still swung his club.

After factoring in the combined penalties Ainz's touch and the fear status, evading the Martial Lord's attack should have been child's play. However—

"[Strong Strike], [Divine Skill Single Flash]!"

Ainz thought he saw a flash of light.

In that instant, intense pain — immediately suppressed to tolerable levels — and a floating sensation filled him.

"[Flow Acceleration]!"

A dull impact came from above, followed by a burst of pain in the next moment.

Although he was briefly confused by the situation, Ainz quickly came to his senses.

This was probably a two-hit combo. The first part launched Ainz into the air, while the second smashed him down into the ground.

If he was Suzuki Satoru, he might not have been able to grasp the situation and fallen into confusion. However, Ainz Ooal Gown was immune to such bad statuses.

Ainz knew that he was down on the ground, and that the club was coming down on him.

“Cheh!”

Ainz flipped away just as the club struck. Perhaps it was because of a martial art, but the impact flowed through the ground and into Ainz’s body.

However, this did not deal any additional damage.

As Ainz leapt, the club that buried itself in the ground sprang up. That move, like dredging up something from the depths, seemed to say “I’ll finish you with this”.

Ainz made a split-second decision to block the strike with his stiletto, and Ainz’s body sailed through the air once more. The audience’s cheers rang through the arena, but the Martial Lord bitterly cursed, “Dammit!” He had been hoping to finish off Ainz with that combination attack.

After being knocked several meters through the air, Ainz tumbled a few times on the ground and then swiftly regained his stance as he muttered about himself.

“Nothing to turn the tide? He tricked me. Punitto Moe would scold me for this.”

Much like Ainz, the Martial Lord had saved his trump card — his martial arts — until the final moment. That proved he was a first-rate warrior.

Ainz sheathed one of his stilettos, freeing up a hand.

His arrogance and haste to seize victory had earned him a hard blow — no, two of them. It was time to discard his naive thinking. He would cut his opponent's stats down to size before ending things.

How noisy...

The audience's cheers were really annoying. They had just been wailing, and now they were rejoicing. Especially—

—Dammit, Jircniv! What the hell do you mean, "finish him?!" Ah, seriously...

Ainz moved slowly. He had not been severely injured, but he had been punished for his carelessness with pain, so he would not make that sort of mistake again.

Still, I really don't get martial arts. These are skills which don't exist in YGGDRASIL… did someone develop them to counter YGGDRASIL players? Or am I just trying to force a theory here…? Hang on, that martial art should have been something which increased attack speed. He'll probably try that again, so I'd better prepare my body for it, no?
(TL Note: Once again Ainz seems to have misremembered a saying, **肉を切らせて骨を断つ**, to prepare your flesh to be cut and your bones to be broken. Of course, he has no flesh…)

Ainz entered the Martial Lord's reach, and the Martial Lord swung down. Yet Ainz did not evade.

He advanced, taking the Martial Lord's attacks.

The pressure and pain filled him, but he could do this, given the huge difference in their HP. It was fine. In addition, his undead body immediately suppressed his pain, so he could bear agony which the living could not endure.

In this way, Ainz touched the Martial Lord's body. Having just finished an attack — and being under the influence of the fear status from Ainz's aura — it was quite difficult to evade it.

Then, he maintained contact with the Martial Lord's body and circled around to his back. Of course, he was continuously infusing the ability-damaging negative energy through his armor.

"Uoooooooooh!"

This time, it was the Martial Lord who backed away from him, as though rolling along the ground.

Ainz was puzzled over whether or not to pursue, but decided to stay still, in case of some hidden move.

The Martial Lord ponderously raised his weapon. His breathing was ragged, and his imposing demeanor from when they had first met was gone.

Ainz gripped his stilettos tightly.

The preparations were complete. This would be the final strike.

Perhaps he had sensed the change in the air, but the Martial Lord removed his helmet and cast it aside.

As surprise began to fill Ainz, the Martial Lord shed the rest of his armor as well. While he was currently weakened, it did not seem to be at a level where he was unable to move due to the weight of his armor.

However, after seeing the determination on the Martial Lord's face, Ainz understood his plan.

I see. Armor protects against the stilettos, but it does nothing against ability penalties. He must feel quite threatened by it, which is why he's gambling on his foe's HP being low and lightening the load on his body, just so he can continue attacking.

That was his final — and also a very disadvantageous — gamble.

"Tell me… Am I weak?"

"What?"

“Your Majesty. you have not revealed a fraction of your true power until now. Even without the mighty wings of your magic, this is clearly not taxing you. Am… Am I really that weak?”

Ainz closed his eyes in thought, and then he opened them again.

“Yes, you are weak.”

“...Is that so.”

The arena fell silent.

Ainz’s voice had not reached them. However, the victory was already decided in their eyes.

“During this battle, I forbade myself the use of many magic items and the use of all sorts of abilities.”

“Otherwise, you would have ended this in an instant?”

Ainz nodded in confirmation.

“Just so. However, I know about you, so—” Ainz shook his head. This was not meant to comfort him. “Well, you just had a bad opponent. If you are the strongest man in the Empire… I may well be the strongest man in the world.”

“I see… Still… I am glad. Knowing that someone is better than me is what drives me to improve.”

“I do understand that, to some extent.”

There were some of his friends — for instance, Touch Me — whom he had never beaten in PVP. Even so, he looked back fondly on how he had pondered the ways to beat his tactics and equipment.

Ainz smiled to the Martial Lord, and the Martial Lord smiled to Ainz.

“...Then, make your move.”

“—Your Majesty, Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown. At the very end, please show me — even if it is just a fraction — of your true power. Allow me to experience the zenith of might!”

The Martial Lord forcefully brandished his weapon.

“Really now… Very well. Then I shall reveal the pinnacle of power to you.”

Ainz activated his skill, and strode forth.

He entered the Martial Lord’s attack range. The Martial Lord swung down.

It was completely different from the speed at which he had raised it. He might have used martial arts to accelerate it. Still, it was nothing compared to the speed before he had his abilities penalized. It was far too slow.

The club swung down on Ainz’s body, but Ainz paid it no heed.

The attack could no longer harm Ainz’s body.

Ainz walked through it, as though caressed by a gentle wind.

He took blow after blow, but Ainz continued advancing, looking straight into the Martial Lord’s eyes.

The Martial Lord smiled, as though giving up. Ainz plunged his stiletto into the Martial Lord’s unresisting chest, and then released the spell imbued within.

♦ ♦ ♦

Ainz looked down on the Martial Lord’s corpse.

Then, he activated a borrowed magic item. It was a simple loudspeaker.

“Hear me! People of the Empire! I am the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown!”

His voice seemed to echo with a high-pitched whine of feedback amidst the silence. Thus, Ainz decided to wrap this up quickly.

“I intend to establish a program to train and raise adventurers within my country. This is because I consider it advantageous for my country to both cultivate and protect adventurers, and send them travelling to various places in the world. Many adventurers must survive with their own resources. But how many have been cut down before they reached their prime?”

Ainz recalled the adventurer team he had travelled with for a short time.

“...Therefore, I intend to incorporate the Adventurer’s Guild into my nation. There are those who fear that they will lose their freedom and be shackled down once the Adventurer’s Guild becomes a national organization. I cannot completely rule that out. However, like I have just shown, my strength is more than adequate. I do not intend to use you as tools for war. The Sorcerous Kingdom thirsts those who truly seek adventure! All you who wish to explore the unknown, who wish to understand the world and thus dream of becoming adventurers, come to me! I will help you stand on your own, with the aid of power you cannot imagine. Now behold a fraction of that might!”

Ainz walked over to the Martial Lord.

“The Martial Lord is dead! Who will verify his death?”

There was no answer.

“Death is the end of everything. Yet — as some here might know, death can be fought off.”

Ainz withdrew a wand, and pointed it at the Martial Lord’s chest.

It would be terribly embarrassing if he did not come back to life. His nonexistent heart pounded within his chest.

“Witness this!”

The wand activated, and then the Martial Lord gasped. Then, his chest began moving.

“Resurrection magic is the province of high-level priests. However, it is not a challenge for me! That said, the appropriate payment in gold must still be made! I, who have conquered death, shall back you up! Come to my nation, you who seek to become true adventurers!”

Amidst the tides of sound, Ainz cast a [Fly] spell.

His destination was Jircniv’s VIP room.

Glancing around, he noticed that only Jircniv and his two bodyguards were left. The others seemed to have departed early. Ainz was delighted at having less to worry about, but he said nothing.

“Well, sorry about that just now, Jircniv-dono. Oya, your face looks better now. What a relief.”

His dizziness when standing up seemed genuine. However — since he had been cheering so energetically, it must have only been for a moment.

“I apologize for worrying you, Gown-dono.”

“Ahhh, don’t mind it. Anyone would be worried if they saw someone they knew looking unwell.”

“Thank you for your concern. Still, that was an exciting match. As expected of you, Gown-dono. To think you could triumph so easily over the Empire’s strongest warrior. There are no words for that but ‘magnificent’.”

“Certainly not. This was a good bout. It could have gone both ways; I simply had luck on my side.”

Given the way Jircniv was cheering for the Martial Lord, he must have been a big fan. That being the case, he could not go wrong by praising the Martial Lord.

Or rather—

—Damn you, you didn’t cheer for me at all. I heard it!

Of course, he could not voice these thoughts. When one thought calmly about it, in a battle between the warriors of one's own nation and that of another country, it was only natural for one to cheer for one's own countrymen.

Well, if he had actually cheered for Ainz, his affection meter — a phrase Peroroncino frequently used — would probably have gone through the roof.

"While outsiders might not be able to tell, I am sure you are not mistaken, Gown-dono. Then, next — forgive me. What am I saying at this time?"

"Indeed," Ainz agreed. Put in another way, he did not wish to be chatting with Jircniv for so long in a place like this.

He did not want him to realize that Ainz Ooal Gown was just a mortal man.

Although he thought he would be scolded for promoting the Sorcerous Kingdom in the arena and for his illegal border crossing, Jircniv did not seem to want to rebuke him. That being the case, it was best for him to quickly make his exit.

"Well, that's—" Ainz swallowed the informal words he was about to speak. That would be like digging his own grave. "Let us end things here for now. I shall come to visit another day, Jircniv-dono."

Personally, Ainz wanted to escape with teleportation magic, but he had to go pick up Ainzach first. So he would return to the ground, and then teleport away — and then, as he was pondering that matter, Ainz realized that Jircniv was staring at him, a serious look on his face.

He was definitely going to say something weird.

This situation was familiar to any salaryman. Ainz turned to look at Jircniv.

"Your Majesty. I have a proposal. May I prevail upon you to hear it?"

No. How wonderful would the world be if he could say that?

Ainz decided not to run away from reality. He smiled — although his face did not move — and replied with a “Do continue.”

“Then, I hope — no, the Baharuth Empire would like to become a vassal state of the Sorcerous Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown.”

“...Hah?”

Ainz could not help but exclaim at those thoroughly unexpected words.

His brain had not yet parsed what he had just heard.

“Vas— a vassal state?”

His guards — both of whom he had seen before — were also staring in shock.

For some reason, Ainz felt like patting Jircniv on the forehead.

Why had he suddenly requested vassal status? Come to think of it, what sort of relationship did vassal states have, anyway? He recognized the word, but what exactly did it mean? Then there was all that self-governing stuff and so on.

Ainz could not decide something important like that by himself. He would need to discuss this matter with Demiurge and Albedo first before giving an answer.

“...Jircniv-dono, taking your nation as a vassal state…”

So the plan of forming a bond of friendship between kings is… eh?

What should he say about the vassal state issue? Would it be alright to go with “I had not considered it”?

However, Demiurge and the others might have intended to vassalize the Empire. He did not wish to put his own head in a noose, and yet it might be troublesome to leave it unaddressed.

It would seem the best option was to bluff his way through, somehow.

After deciding on the direction his words would take, Ainz made his reply.

“It is too dangerous to verbally agree on such matters. I cannot make an immediate reply, but I believe such issues should be set down in writing.”

“Then, does it mean that once I hand the document to you, you will approve of it?”

Eh? There’s seriously going to be one? Ainz thought of asking that, but he managed to swallow those words. It was probably because he had calmed down somewhat. The truth was, he was no longer perturbed as he had been just now. He could not thank this body of his enough.

Still, the problem was yet to be solved.

That’s not what I meant, I’m just stalling for time. Since he could not speak those words, he had to think of something that Jircniv could accept. There was no other way.

“...Certainly. Then, do send a copy of the petition for vassalage as well as a draft of the Empire’s future status and treatment to my residence in the Sorcerous Kingdom, Jircniv-dono. After that, we shall plan at length.”

“Then I shall do so. I will endeavour to finish it swiftly and deliver it to Your Majesty’s hands. —Then, for the time being, please allow me to speak to you as a king — as an equal. I shall be in your care.”

Although his emotional state had calmed down, Ainz still had no idea what was going on and why the situation had ended up like this. He simply nodded in response.

Then, trying not to appear too panicked, Ainz descended onto the arena with a [Fly] spell.

“How did it all end up like this? Or rather, what would Demiurge and Albedo do…?”

Ainz rounded his shoulders, like a child who was certain he would be scolded by his parents when he got home.

◆ ◆ ◆

The air in the VIP room was silent in the wake of the Sorcerer King's departure. As though to shatter this silence, Nimble shouted:

"Your Majesty!"

Jircniv furrowed his brows in an exaggerated manner as he looked at Nimble.

"You're being too loud. I'm still nearby."

"For-forgive me. But, but, may I know what just happened?!"

"You wish to know why I made a decision like that?"

Nimble nodded in response. Jircniv glanced to Baziwood, who had a similar attitude.

"I see… Then, what else would you suggest I do?"

Jircniv laughed at himself.

"Ever since he came here, along with his — ah! Negotiations with the Slaine Theocracy have broken down. The temples don't think well of me either. How long would it take to bring the matter of those negotiations up again? Is that even a problem which can be solved with enough time?"

Jircniv thought about what he would do if he were one of the higher-ups in the Slaine Theocracy. If another country gave an excuse as pathetic as, "That was just Ainz Ooal Gown seeing through our scheme, we didn't intend for anything else," they would surely think there was no value in allying with that country and abandon it. No, they might end up using that country as fuel for some kind of plot in the future.

It would seem an alliance with the Slaine Theocracy was pretty much out of the question.

“So he’s saying, ‘please struggle as hard as you can by yourself without the Theocracy as allies’, hm? My my, as expected of His Majesty, the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown. I have to take my hat off to him. His reach is truly longer than I could have imagined. First, he lets his foes grow proud, and then he destroys them in one hit when they lower their guard.”

Though he was an enemy, Jircniv could not help but praise that perfect scheme.

It was so perfectly calculated that he had no choice but to admit defeat. There was no sign of any reinforcements for the Empire, while Ainz already had solid proof of the Empire’s actions. In other words, Ainz held the power of life and death over the Empire.

Baziwood shook his head. It would seem they understood the situation they were in.

“Ahh, this is really… how shall I put this. He really put the boot in. He hit you right in your weak spot. Something like that.”

“Exactly. I can’t think of any way to deal with him. I guess I’m broken in mind and body. It feels like anything would be fine at this point.”

“Your Majesty…” Nimble looked toward Jircniv, speaking quietly.

“He’s not so much undead as he is a devil. It feels as if he knows how to thoroughly break a man’s will.”

“Still, even so, becoming a vassal state…”

Jircniv looked gently upon Nimble, who still seemed unable to accept it.

He could understand the man’s feelings.

However, he would have preferred a rationally considered solution to this problem, rather than that childish revelation of his feelings. Still, if even Jircniv could not solve that problem, how much more so for Nimble?

“...I’ll speak plainly now. We cannot win. The only option we have is, as I said earlier, to subvert his subordinates. I cannot imagine any other way to oppose him. As you might have felt in that war, it’s clear that he’s most powerful as a magic caster.”

The two knights nodded in agreement.

“Then how is he as a warrior? Can you kill him with a sword?”

Jircniv shrugged.

“You should have seen it, right? Even as a warrior, the Martial Lord could not beat him. And what was that? He took the Martial Lord’s attack and remained unhurt? Did he use magic?”

“I’m not sure, but it might be possible.”

“Really now. In other words, he can render any attack ineffective with magic, then? So assassination is impossible. Could he be immortal?”

“Well, he has a physical body, so I doubt he’s immortal.”

“Then why was he unhurt?”

Nimble was left dumbfounded, and he turned to Baziwood beside him for help. However, Baziwood kept his lips pressed flat into a straight line.

“...So, let’s do this for now. Gather all the information you can about the Martial Lord’s weapon, and then we’ll round up all the magic casters and adventurers we can find to ask them about why he was unhurt. Fortunately, that pronouncement of his should have set him against the Adventurer’s Guild, so they should be happy to help us.”

“Then, shouldn’t we have offered vassalage after trying all of those? Fortunately, he refused.”

Jircniv was somewhat annoyed by this, but he suppressed his displeasure and did not show it. Instead, he looked at Nimble with a troubled expression on his face.

“Fortunately? Do you really think of it that way? I think it’s the other way around. On the contrary, is it not best to push for vassalization as quickly as possible?” Jircniv asked Nimble, who had a baffled expression on his face.

“Why do you think he would refuse our offer of vassalage?”

“That, that is… your servant is unsure…”

“Perhaps if he were incompetent, unsure of how to handle the changing situation — he might think of something like that. However, our opponent is that man, remember? Judging by his intellect, he must have already come up with a plan for the future in the brief period after we proposed vassalage. If he refused the offer after thinking it through, that would indicate something about that course of action did not mesh with his aims.”

“And what would that be?”

Jircniv’s face turned bitter from Baziwood’s question.

“I don’t know. Still, well, it probably can’t be good for us. Otherwise he would not be so disturbed by the offer of vassalage. For all we know, the objectives he has in mind are things which he cannot carry out in his own country. In that case—”

Jircniv let his overworked brain, which was soon to emit smoke, run wild.

His opponent was that Ainz Ooal Gown. He must surely have some objective in mind.

As the king of the Sorcerer Kingdom, what would he want? What would he hate?

Sweat beaded on his forehead, and Jircniv struggled to think.

“—The Adventurer’s Guild? Could it be he wants to do something to the Adventurer’s Guild, which is why he opposed the vassalage?”

“What about that declaration? ...Would permitting it be a good idea, Your Majesty? In a few years’ time, a lot of the best and brightest of the Empire might end up flowing out of the country.”

“...I did not get that at all. Tell me how you arrived at that.”

“While doing as he says means that one’s freedom might be restricted, having the incredibly powerful Sorcerer King as backing is a very attractive proposition. In the adventuring profession, far more people die than manage to make a name for themselves. However, with someone that powerful supporting them… well, at least that’s what those people with no confidence in themselves will think. Also, since we have knights, there aren’t many jobs for low-ranked adventurers in the first place.”

“An outflow of talent… Although they may not have faith in themselves, it doesn’t mean they’re not capable.”

There were people who were talented, yet lacked self-confidence. Yet, it would take a very confident person to explore a new world.

“If that’s the case, aren’t these all reasons to oppose vassalization? Still… wouldn’t it be more convenient for us to become a vassal state? That way, he can swallow up the Adventurer’s Guild up directly… Ah! Ainz Ooal Gown! Why must your intellect surpass mine so greatly?! Your schemes are so fiendish I can’t even begin to comprehend them!”

“Is it possible that he’s not thinking about anything at all?”

Jircniv glared hatefully at Baziwood’s joking comment.

“What nonsense is that? He anticipated our movements to this degree… no, it’s unthinkable. We also need to consider the effects of his unknowable feelings that drive him to hate the living…”

Perhaps assuming that he thought like one of the undead was a mistake.

Perhaps Ainz had already anticipated that he would agonize and guess about this, and worked it into his plan. He might well be waiting with open arms for a panicked Jircniv to hasten the vassalization process.

“What should we do now?” Nimble asked. He was referring to the Empire’s future actions.

“...I intend to spread the news to the surrounding countries. First, I will gather the scribes and tell them in rough terms that the Empire chooses submission and to become a vassal state of the Sorcerous Kingdom, and that we have no choice in the matter. We will get the news out to the surrounding countries quickly and let it spread, so the Sorcerous Kingdom has no choice but to acknowledge it.”

“Your Majesty…”

The two of them lowered their heads. The fact that even Baziwood had an expression like that on his face made Jircniv wonder if it was a joke.

He deleted the bitter smile from his face, and spoke in a friendly manner.

“Why so glum? There are all sorts of vassal states. If we are allowed to govern ourselves for the most part, then we can continue living as we always have. No — if the Sorcerous Kingdom defends us with their incredible power, then would we not be safer than before?”

As they heard about a slightly brighter future(probably), a little color returned to their faces.

“Therefore, we need to deal with any internal dissatisfaction. If the Sorcerous Kingdom does not allow us to rule ourselves, the Empire might start to fragment. There might be factions which are not pleased with vassalage that might make their move as well.”

Jircniv began thinking about the disposition of the factions within the Empire.

The most important ones were the Knight Corps. However, they would not switch over to the anti-vassalage faction. Even if they opposed it , it would only be lip service. They would not actually take action.

Next were the nobles. They could not be predicted. While there were few people who would complain about Jircniv’s decision, those few might be aiming for a chance to depose the Bloody Emperor. These were people who might try anything to become the new rulers of the vassalized Empire.

The commoners could be deceived. To them, as long as life went on as normal, they would not mind becoming a vassal state.

"—The priests will be a problem."

The temples would never acknowledge this. And, it would be worse if the temples not only opposed it, but forbade all recuperative activity. He would need to talk with them repeatedly and get them to come over to his thinking.

"...Will you be alright, Your Majesty?"

"Who knows? While I'm around, we'll have the best chance of vassalizing, and I plan to show the results of doing so… but that might not be good to say."

Why me, he thought.

He had inherited this task from his father, and the Empire had steadily grown stronger. He should not have misstepped at any point during that process.

But then that monster appeared, and everything had gone mad.

There was probably nothing wrong in the way he negotiated with that monster. It was simply that Ainz Ooal Gown was a being whose thought processes transcended those of mankind.

In just a month, everything had changed.

Jircniv sighed deeply.

"I must be the unluckiest man in the world…"

Though that was merely idle chatter, the news of Silver Canary changing their home base from the Empire to the City-State Alliance soon reached the demoralized Jircniv. In the coming days, Jircniv would come to bemoan this as "blessings do not come in pairs, while calamities do not come alone."

OVERLORD VOLUME 10

EPILOGUE

Demiurge walked happily through the 9th Floor of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.

The sensation of returning after a long time was probably an illusion of some sort. After all, he returned to this place from time to time, and the longest stretch of time he had been away from here was a fortnight at the most. Thus, the reason for his misperception was clearly due to the joy he felt at walking through this place.

His mood lifted the closer he got to his objective.

Demiurge paid no heed to the guards Cocytus had stationed on either side of the doors as he adjusted his tie and inspected his appearance. Naturally, he paid attention to it at all times, but he did not want his master to see a side of him which was less than immaculate.

After a very earnest inspection of his personal grooming, Demiurge knocked on the door of the room.

One of the maids opened the door, poking her head out to see who was calling.

Demiurge wanted to try and spy out a glimpse of his master through the gap, but he could not do anything that embarrassing.

“May I know if Ainz-sama is in his room?”

“My sincerest apologies, Demiurge-sama. Ainz-sama is not in.”

His mood plummeted but he did not let it show on his face.

“Is that so. Then, where has Ainz-sama gone?”

“My sincerest apologies, I do not know… However, Albedo-sama might know something about it.”

She was right.

“Really now. Then, where is Albedo now?”

“She is in this room.”

Demiurge knew Albedo treated her master’s room as her workroom. *Can’t you just use the room you’ve been assigned*, he often thought, but after considering her personality, he ended up keeping quiet. The most important thing was his master’s approval. With that, there was nothing else for him to add.

“Is she working? ...Could you help me check if this is a convenient time to visit?”

“Understood.”

The door before him closed. A moment later, it opened again.

“Please come in, Demiurge-sama.”

Demiurge thanked the maid and then entered. Before his eyes was the Guardian Overseer, seated on a chair in front of his master’s desk.

Her lowered line of sight moved, and caught hold of Demiurge.

“It’s been a while, Albedo.”

“Ah, Demiurge. You’ve worked hard abroad. What is it today?”

“Ah, it concerns the matter in the Holy Kingdom. I was planning to obtain permission for the final stages of the plan. I will need a Doppelganger… where is Ainz-sama?”

“He is somewhat far away. I doubt he will be able to return quickly…”

In other words, he is not in E-Rantel, Demiurge mused. *Otherwise she would not describe it in such a strange way.*

“That is somewhat of an inconvenience. Then, I shall perform preparation work on the 7th Floor until Ainz-sama returns.”

“If it is urgent, could you not communicate with [Message]?”

Demiurge frowned, and observed Albedo’s expression.

She had her usual smile on, but the perceptive Demiurge detected some other emotion within her.

If she was just toying with him, it would be fine.

Demiurge attempted to quickly study her, but he could not read that deeply.

It ached at him, but then again, this was not a contest in the first place.

Among all the people of Nazarick, the only two people he could not read were his master and Albedo. He set them aside as rare exceptions for the sake of his inner peace.

Demiurge shrugged.

“It is not that urgent. If Ainz-sama returns the day after, I shall inform him myself.”

“Ainz-sama did not mention how long he would be gone. He might take a very long time.”

“Then, I shall go to Ainz-sama’s side, Albedo. It is not a matter which requires the use of [Message].”

“Ara? Why is that? If it is truly important, would it not be more loyal to inform him as soon as possible?”

The context of Albedo's smile had changed. Earlier, it was her usual fake smile, but now it was a wicked, bullying smile. She must have some sort of ill intent in mind.

It would seem there was something she wanted to say, no matter what.

How tiresome, Demiurge thought as he stated his reasons.

"I desire to display my achievements to Ainz-sama, so I do not wish to use such methods to contact him. While I can receive his praise through a [Message], in the end, I would still prefer to hear his voice in person. That is all… Is that not the shared dream for all in Nazarick?"

"Mm, indeed, Demiurge. It is as you say. Anyone would feel that way."

"Then, where has Ainz-sama gone?"

"He has gone to visit the Dwarf Kingdom, about which little is known and which has not made diplomatic contact until now. Thus, we do not know how much time it will take."

"Who accompanies him?"

"Shalltear and Aura."

That should be fine in terms of combat strength. However other aspects were more worrisome.

Aura was fine. All she needed to do was not inconvenience Ainz-sama. Yet, the face of the other person appeared in Demiurge's mind.

"Still, by bringing Shalltear along, does he intend to destroy the Dwarf Kingdom?"

Mare would have been a much better choice for verbal negotiations. Thus, that choice was made for other reasons.

"—What are the other Guardians doing?"

“Cocytus is managing the lake. Mare is building a dungeon outside E-Rantel. Sebas is carrying out his duties in E-Rantel. Although I do not know what Ainz-sama intends, the fact that he did not bring an army along would suggest a peaceful visit, no?”

“...There is insufficient information for that. Why did Ainz-sama want to go to the Dwarf Kingdom?”

“Demiurge. We cannot predict Ainz-sama’s thoughts.”

It was as Albedo said.

His master, Ainz Ooal Gown, was the supreme ruler of Nazarick, who concealed countless stratagems within a single move of a chess piece. Demiurge — who had been created with outstanding talents — could not even hope to graze the soles of his brilliance with his outstretched hands. Attempting to read his master’s motivations was a mistake.

That said, sensing his master’s will and preparing for it was a mark of true loyalty.

If I don’t work hard enough...

As Demiurge rebuilt his conviction once more, Albedo picked up a piece of parchment from the table.

“This came from the Empire yesterday. I opened it after receiving Ainz-sama’s permission via [Message]. It contains an offer of vassalage from the Empire. The exact details of the vassalization are to be finalized later.”

Demiurge was shocked. This was much earlier than he had anticipated.

“What’s this? According to my predictions, the Empire should only have offered to be vassals after the Kingdom was destroyed…”

“That is the result of Ainz-sama’s visit to the Empire.”

“This is… As expected of Ainz-sama…”

“Say, Demiurge. Did you really think the Empire would only become a vassal after the Kingdom would?”

“Of course. That was how I planned it.”

“Regardless of what methods you used?”

“...What are you trying to say?“

“Ainz-sama often mentioned your name. It came up in the context of ‘Did you hear from Demiurge? Then it should be all right.’ In other words, there was something about you — about your plan which he could not accept.”

“What are you saying.. Albedo, why didn’t you tell me earlier? If that’s the case—”

“If what is the case?”

Demiurge could not speak.

“...Let me ask you again. Was there no way to make the Empire a vassal before the Kingdom?”

“...There was. However, it would have required Ainz-sama himself to act. It would be a shameful course of action for a subordinate to advise. In addition, I felt that it would require the execution of several methods — requiring at least a month — in order to cause a violent upheaval within a large city. That being the case, I believed that it would have been better to begin by subjugating the Kingdom and then applying pressure on other areas… how long did Ainz-sama take?”

“I was in the Kingdom, so I am not sure, but I think it was three days at the most.”

Demiurge’s eyes went wide.

That was too fast.

How had he demonstrated his subjugating might? How had he broken the will of the Emperor, who sought to ally with other nations?

Although Demiurge had prepared a perfect plan that would render the Emperor unable to take action, his master seemed to have crafted a scheme which surpassed even that.

“Three days? How did he do that…”

“Incidentally, there were almost no casualties.”

His gaping mouth felt like it had been stoppered. All he felt was an unstoppable flow of admiration and respect for that absolute ruler. He was like Death itself, quietly standing behind the Emperor and then crushing his heart.

The trembling he felt just now spread from the top of his head to his entire body. Savage delight, admiration, fear and respect mixed within him, and this complex blend of emotions made Demiurge shudder without end.

“As, as expected of Ainz-sama. Someone like me could not hope to even approach him. He is truly a peerless and perfect master. Nobody else could have led the Supreme Beings. I cannot help but envy Pandora’s Actor, even if just a little.”

Albedo went *kuku*, her smile full of superiority.

It must have been the sense of superiority a woman felt when she was ordered to love such a marvelous man.

“In addition, Ainz-sama has ordered us to decide how to handle the vassalage of the Kingdom.”

“Ordered us? Why?”

“Is that not obvious? Much of the developments in this field have been due to the use of your plan, Demiurge. Even so, Ainz-sama said nothing to you and pushed the vassalization of the Empire forward with his own plan. Thus, his heart ached.”

He could not understand that. Perhaps if he was displeased at his own incompetence, he could understand that. But not this.

"...Why? I do not understand."

Hah~ Albedo sighed tiredly.

"It is because he trusts you. In other words… how shall I put this. You should be able to understand it with that mind of yours, but this is probably how it is. Not following your plan is equivalent to doubting your abilities. Ainz-sama awaited your communication because he did not want to do that. However, Ainz-sama felt you were too concerned about him. Thus, his independent action was meant to tell you, 'don't worry about me', I believe."

It was an answer he could accept. No, it would be better to say there could be no other answer but that.

"This truly is…"

Demiurge lowered his face in shame. At the same time, he was filled with delight after he realised how his master had thought of him.

"Demiurge. We must work to repay Ainz-sama's kindness."

"Of course, Albedo."

Demiurge was excited.

"In order to fulfil Ainz-sama's expectations, let us finish a vassalage plan for the Kingdom for him to see before he returns!"

"Indeed. Ainz-sama has gone in person, so there must be many schemes in store. He will surely be busy once he returns from the Dwarven Kingdom."

Demiurge grinned.

"Indeed, Albedo. Indeed."

Postscript by So-bin

VOLUME 10 IS FINALLY FINISHED.
YOU SHOULD READ IT WHILE LISTENING
TO THE ANIME OST, THEY GO GREAT TOGETHER.
So-bin

OVERLORD VOLUME 10

AFTERWORD

“A man should not give excuses”. I heard these words once, I will not say anything. However, please allow me to say one thing -- if my memory serves me correctly, the current date should be 17th month of 2015, right?

Also, I recall hearing someone say, “Prearrangements are not fixed, thus they aren’t the same as the final outcome”. Ah, what a charming phrase! How full of romance it is!

...I’m very sorry.

Volume 11 will not be like this one. There is no intention of making you wait, so I hope everyone can find it in themselves to forgive me. Also, the next volume is -- well, anyone who’s read all the way to the end, it can’t be helped if it’s written down.. In addition, volume 11 will feature a much-awaited special edition. Anyone who’s seen the anime will understand. It’s a new 30 minute-long episode of Pure Pure Pleiades, isn’t that surprising?!

Then, how do you feel after reading Volume 10, everyone?

How different is running a country from running an organization?

Ainz started from his interests, but how would you all do it? Maruyama is very interested in the answer. If it were me, I would do this. If it were me, I would do that. I would be very glad to hear everyone’s opinions on that matter.

And if it should turn out that someone created another work based on this, or even another original light novel, I would be even more delighted. Because in truth, that's Maruyama for you.

And then, you already know of the popularity poll from the tail end of the book. Please tell me the characters you like best. Unlike ordinary popularity polls, the fact that the first place is already decided is something which has never been seen before.

I won't give extra appearances to unexpectedly popular characters. This is simply to see which characters everyone likes best.

Next, the people I want to thank:

Sorry for ruining your schedule, so-bin-sama. Thank you very much for this.

My sincere thanks to Ohaku-sama the proofreader, the designers, Chord Design Studio-sama and the editor, F-da-sama. Also to honey, my friend from my student days, thank you as always.

Most importantly, thank you to all you readers out there. The story is now completely divorced from the WN, so I would be very happy if you liked it.

2015/17

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(v2.2)